The Paris Review

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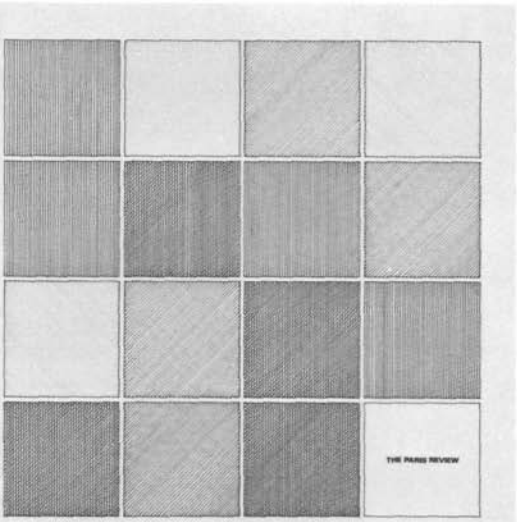

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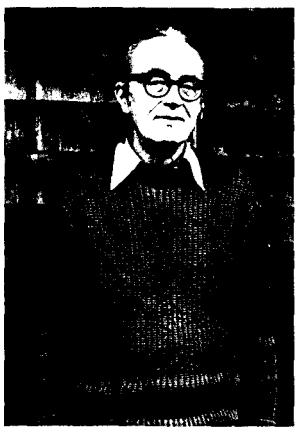

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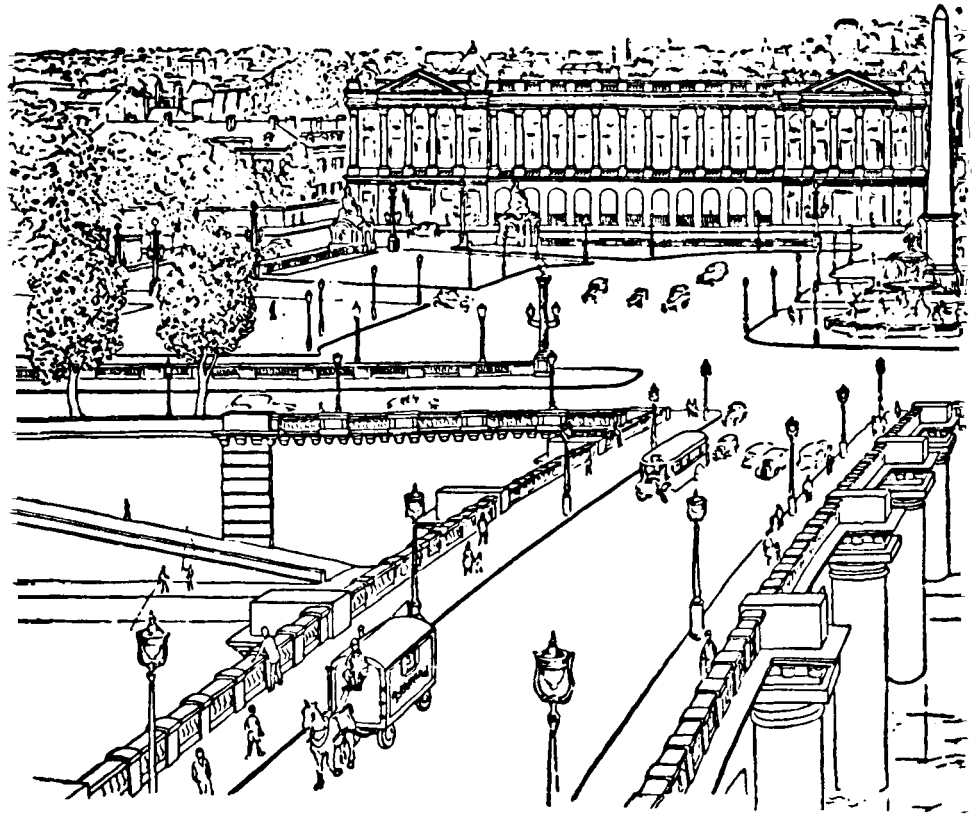

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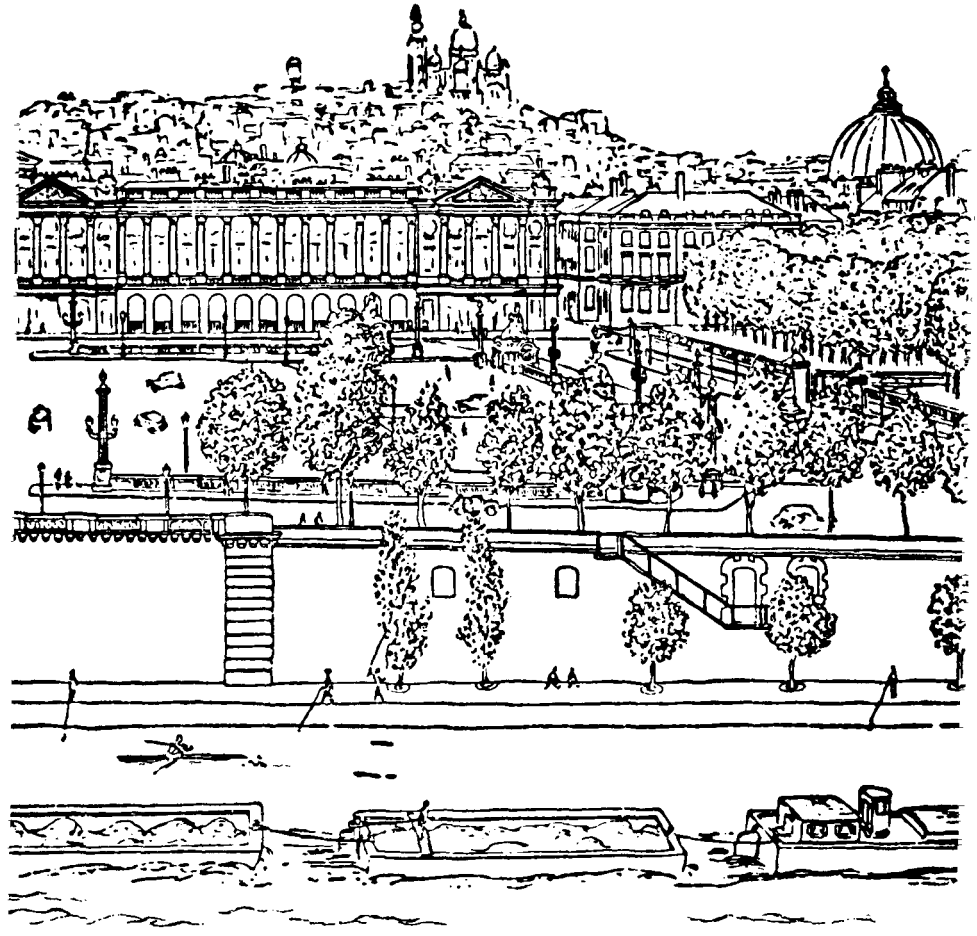

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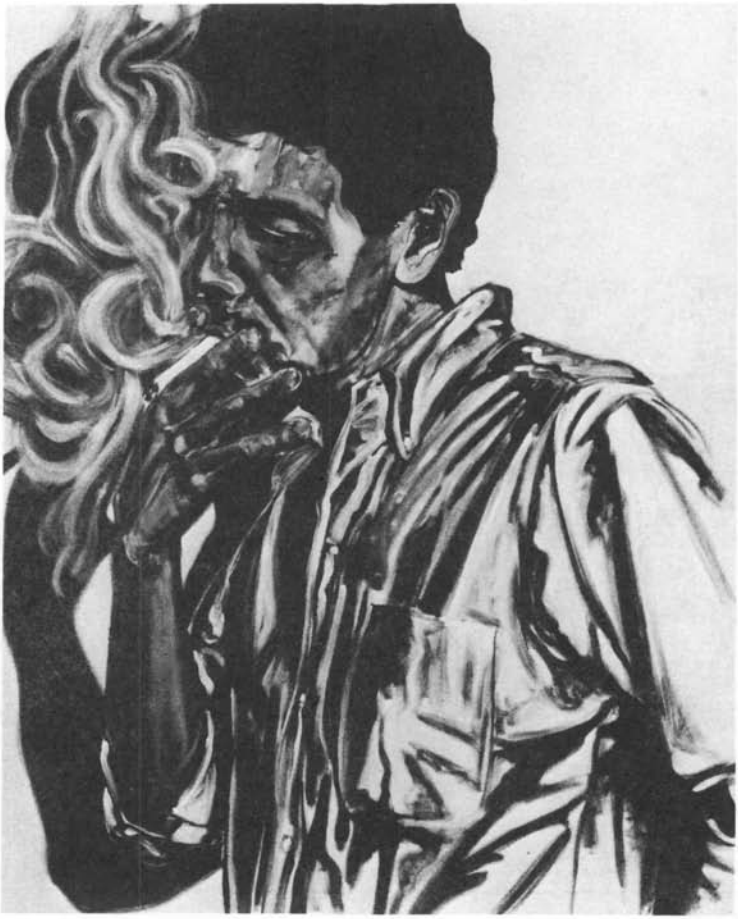

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The Paris Review is pleased to announce that the winner of the 1983 Aga Khan Prize for Fiction is "Crystal River" by Charlie Smith, which appeared in the Summer 1983 issue, #88.

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The Flight

Eugene K. Garber

I

A young woman gets on a small feeder plane in Peoria, a real old-timey number, a DC something, the aisle so steep that she has to grab on to the seats and pull her way up. The lights on the wall are pale yellow. "Smoking or no smoking?" The stewardess, flight attendant that is, laughs, because there is only one other passenger on the plane, a big bald-headed man. The woman chooses a seat behind him and on the other side. She picks up an open magazine to return it to the pouch in the back of the seat ahead. Something catches her eye—a full-page ad for a honeymoon spa in the Poconos. A perfect, not to say plastic, young couple are standing chest-deep in an oak tub, drinking champagne. Elsewhere on the page are shots of bedrooms, tennis courts, a glittering discotheque, etc. The woman sticks the magazine in the pouch. The heads of the newlyweds poke up above the rim of the tub like the mischievous children of a giant marsupial.

"Passenger Whitcomb?" says the flight attendant, half a question, half a greeting.

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"Yes."

"Welcome aboard, Ms. Whitcomb. Would you care for a Coke?" The flight attendant is wearing a red and white neckerchief and has a hard face though only thirtyish.

"No thank you."

"All right. Please fasten your seat belt. We'll be taking off shortly." The flight attendant goes forward to the cockpit, opens the hatch, and disappears inside.

Meanwhile the ground crew are closing the passenger door and dogging it tight. There are voices. The tail rocks perceptibly and then all is quiet.

A minute or two later the flight attendant reappears. She has on an old-timey aviator's helmet with the goggles pushed up on the forehead. The ear flaps are not yet snapped under her chin and therefore hang jauntily beside her cheeks. She also wears a parachute. The straps of the double baldric, in the shape of a sawbuck, cross precisely between her breasts and divide them neatly one on either side, causing them to bulge larger than normal—like an Amazon's. "Don't worry," says the flight attendant, running her thumbs with reassuring expertise under the straps, "I'm no Amelia Earhart about to disappear into the western sunset."

The bald man chuckles.

The flight attendant now slips briefly into an official singsong: "Thank you for flying Wawaneka. Please note that there are two emergency exits, one on either side." She points with a show of great precision to windows behind the two passengers. "There will be no demonstration for this flight of emergency oxygen equipment." She smiles wryly. "Because this is what's called in the trade a hedge-hopper. We'll be lucky to be a thousand feet up when we cross the Mississippi." The flight attendant turns with military quickness and goes back into the cockpit, shutting the door decisively behind her. Before she does, however, Whitcomb notices that the parachute straps also run between her legs and outline her sex with a perfect V. In the back the straps press hard against her buttocks before terminating at a wide waist band. Whitcomb imagines what it would feel like to be suspended

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in the air by those straps, especially in a turbulent sky, swinging and bouncing under the buffeted chute.

"She's something, ain't she?" says the bald man, turning strenuously, peering over his seat, and catching Whitcomb's eye. He is very jowly and fat. Superfluous tissue in fact has piled up around his ears like a ridged mound of fatuous good humor. He speaks in a slow southern dialect. "Little ol' twit ain't hardly bigger'n a minute but here she is fixing to jockey this thing up in the sky."

The fat man is right. The engines rev and the plane begins to roll. Moments later it's airborne. For a while Whitcomb watches the lights of Peoria diminish and then her eyes wander again to the magazine with the heads of the two young lovers smiling out at her. *Rolfing*. The word comes to her out of nowhere, it seems, but then she remembers that she has seen a TV documentary on the sybaritic practices of the residents of Marin County, California. She also remembers hearing the following: if you run a feather along the bottom of a person's foot and the toes turn down, then the person is all right, but if the toes turn up, then the person is crazy. Or is it the other way around?

The engine has stopped its shuddering strain and dropped into a dull hum, and the aisle is almost level now. The fat man gets up with a grunt and works his way out into the center of the cabin, where he stands breathing strenuously. He is immense.

"You don't have to talk if you don't want to," he says, working his way cautiously back toward Whitcomb, "but I'm going to sit down here." He drops himself heavily into the seat directly across the aisle from Whitcomb. Inevitably he farts, but takes no notice of it. Whitcomb says, "Sit where you like." There is nothing offish in her tone. In fact, she awards him a tolerant smile.

"Good." The fat man pulls a stogie out of his jacket, unwraps it, and fishes out of his vest pocket a tiny jackknife attached to a fob chain. He opens the knife, carves the end of the stogie, reams the hole, folds the knife back up, and returns it to his vest pocket—a ceremony that takes perhaps

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three minutes. "Madam or miss, as the case may be," he says, "you are about to smell the sweetest smoke this side of the hash-hash-eens."

"Ms.," says Whitcomb, but it seems unlikely that the fat man has caught the distinction. At the moment he is twirling the end of the stogie between his lips, dampening it thoroughly—an action which appears to produce in him a state of mild ecstasy. Meanwhile, Whitcomb registers the improbable fact that a Phi Beta Kappa key hangs on the fob chain.

Now the fat man pulls a small gold metal case from yet another pocket, removes a match, strikes it against the base, and lights up, taking first a few short puffs and then blowing a single heavy gust toward the ceiling of the cabin. This done, he smiles benignly at Whitcomb, who—still without the slightest acerbity—says, "Beautifully done."

The fat man sticks the cigar in his mouth, takes the gold band from the cellophane wrapper, and slips it onto his little finger. He takes the cigar out of his mouth and chuckles. "With this I thee wed." He pauses. "Which is what my mama predicted lo these many years ago."

"Why? Because she spoiled you so bad that you wouldn't be fit for any other woman?"

The fat man nods amusedly. "*Mi mama me mima.* Isn't that sweet? That's what they say in ol' Me'ico. *My mama she spoils me.* But in my case, miss, it wasn't necessary because I was a natural born Narcissus. And only the grace of the good Lord has kept me from falling to my deserved death in the pools of my own self-adulation." The fat man grins widely. His mouth is full of gold.

Whitcomb smiles and settles back. "What are you doing in this part of the country?"

The fat man looks out the window into the dark. "What part of the country would you call this, miss?"

"Right now, it's the Mississippi Valley, but we're headed for the Great Plains."

"And do the inhabitants of the Great Plains bedizen themselves and later die, just as folks do in other parts?"

"I suppose they do."

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"Well then I've got business with them."

"You're a travelling salesperson. Narcissus on the road, or rather in the airways."

"That's me, miss."

"And what do you sell, Narcissus?"

The fat man sighs. "I wonder, miss, in deference to age and sheer bulk, if you would be kind enough to step up to my seat and bring back the little valise stowed on the floor there."

Whitcomb fetches the valise, which is small but heavy. The fat man receives it with thanks and places it on his knees. Whitcomb takes the aisle seat on her side so that she can watch as the fat man unsnaps the clasp and opens the top. The valise contains catalogues and many display cards of jewelry. The fat man beams over it so that the whole little tableau has the appearance of an illustration in a child's book—a treasure chest so sparkling and luminous that the face of the personage who has opened it is bathed in a preternatural light.

Instead of commenting on the contents of the valise, Whitcomb says mischievously, "Where did you go to college, Mister Narcissus?" When the fat man hesitates, she adds, "I notice you wear a Phi Beta Kappa key."

The fat man gives her a golden grin. "Miss, I attended the College of Knowledge and majored in the Ways of the World." He guffaws. "And as for the Phi Beta Kappa key, that was self-awarded, you might say."

Whitcomb smiles understandingly. "And what other awards have you given yourself?"

This causes a mild sadness to shadow the fat man's eyes, which surprises Whitcomb. He puffs meditatively on his cigar and says at length, "In my time, miss, due to the conditions of my trade, which I will expand on presently, I have had occasion to collect many of the most famous war medals—The Purple Heart, The Medal of Honor, The Legion of Honor, The Distinguished Flying Cross, The Navy Cross, et cetera. But I've never worn them."

"Because you didn't fight."

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"That's right. Too young for World War II, too old for Korea and Vietnam. All the blood and all the glory fell to my left or to my right, but none on me."

"You were lucky."

"That's a woman's way of looking at it, miss. I respect it. But it's not a man's way." Immediately upon saying which, the fat man guffaws loudly. "Here! Why are we talking about all that? What about my wares?"The fat man hands Whitcomb a display card of rings, all mounted in ersatz velvet of royal blue—wedding rings and engagement rings, white metal and yellow metal, the engagement rings mounted with imitation diamonds of various sizes. "You will notice," says the fat man, "that these are all traditional. I pity the poor devil that takes over the territory when I'm done."

Whitcomb frowns. "I don't know what you mean."

"I mean the things that people are putting on each other's fingers nowadays at wedding ceremonies are of such a bizarre variety that it will soon be imposible to keep them in stock—twisted vines, interlocking hearts, snakes swallowing their own tails, God knows what."

"So?" says Whitcomb, irritated by the continuing obscurity of the matter. "How do you work the territory without all that stuff?"

The fat man frowns, a little puzzled it seems. "Didn't I tell you a minute ago that my customers are all deceased?"

"Deceased?"

"In a manner of speaking. You see, miss, about three-and-a-half million Americans die every year, and if all of them that had rings were buried with them, why literally billions in value would go underground. And the times being what they are, the value of gold rising, rising, rising . . ." The fat man widens his eyes. "You take my meaning, miss. Especially in a recession, America can't afford any King Tuts."

Whitcomb nods, but gives the fat man a hard look. "The bereaved get the genuine rings, I hope—and not the undertakers."

The fat man sighs. "One always hopes for the best, miss." Then he suddenly summons his golden grin, taps the card in

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Whitcomb's hands, and says, "How about a set, miss? Any one you want, free—engagement ring and wedding band."

Whitcomb frowns. "What would I do with them? Wait for some prince charming to pop the question and then say *you lucky boy, I've already got the rings*?"

The fat man wheezes merrily around his cigar, "Aw hell naw, miss, you don't want to actually get married with these things. If you perspire a little—as I am told lovers are apt to do—they'll start to turn your finger green, necrotic-like." The fat man chuckles. "Whereas your deceased . . . well, you see the difference, miss."

"Then what would I want the rings for?"

The fat man leans toward her. "Now looky here, miss. A smart-looking young woman like yourself will attract attention. And, grant you, attention can be nice—eyes falling on you, calling up a nice warm flush. Say, don't think I'm criticizing." The fat man's face relaxes benignly. "I myself am an aficionado of attention. All this flesh—you don't think it's an accident, do you? My mama once said, 'Some like to be looked past and some like to be looked at, that's the thin and thick of it.' I'm one of the looked ats, pure and simple. But I'm guessing you're right now in between, miss. That's where the rings come in. You see where I'm going?"

"I'm listening."

"Simple. You want attention, you leave the rings in your purse. You want to be left alone, you put the rings on the fourth finger of your left hand."

Whitcomb shakes her head. "That won't work nowadays."

"Yes it will. Lemme show you." The fat man reaches over, takes Whitcomb's left hand, and runs his fingers along her ring finger. The motion is so deft and gentle that it gives her no reason to resist. Now the fat man examines the card of rings, looking at the sizes inscribed along with the catalogue numbers under each set. Quickly he selects a pair and slides them onto Whitcomb's finger. "These are a little too big, but they'll give you the idea. There." The fat man sits back and looks carefully at Whitcomb. "You feel it?"

"What am I supposed to feel?" The question is something

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of a dodge because in fact Whitcomb does perceive about herself a different aura.

"No, you tell me, miss, what you feel."

"Well, I'll tell you then. It appears that something has been formed—a second skin." Whitcomb smiles. "Can you see me all right?"

The fat man chuckles around his dwindling cigar. "Go on. Go ahead."

"No, there's nothing more. And I don't want you to tell me that it's some primitive talisman, mark of ownership that keeps the male beast at bay."

The fat man chuckles again but is excused from speaking because just at that moment the PA snaps on and the voice of the flight attendant comes up. "How are you honeymooners doing back there? Well, buckle up. We're about to set down at the famous airport of Okekuk, Iowa, to pick up passengers." Dimly audible is a rustle of papers. "Pokorny, Mary and Jess Pokorny. Directly below is the confluence of the Cedar River and the Father of Waters. After we leave Okekuk, it's westward ho to Des Moines, honeymooners. Down we go." The place dips sharply and the pitch of the engines changes. "You will notice that the captain has lighted the no smoking sign. Please extinguish all smoking materials at this time."

The fat man snuffs out his cigar in the arm ashtray. Whitcomb moves over to the window seat, buckles up, and looks out into the night. She cannot see the rivers, only here and there a dimple of light, farm houses probably. Then suddenly there are the blue border lights of the runway and a moment later the bump and squeal of the wheels as the pilot applies the brakes. Whitcomb looks over at the fat man. "Did you ever see a town?"

"No, but I wasn't paying attention. Landings and take-offs make me a little queasy. You'd think after all these years . . ." The fat man goes no farther. His pale face completes his testimony.

Whitcomb continues to peer out the window. "Well, do you see any kind of terminal?"

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The fat man leans over toward the window. "Nope." Nevertheless, the plane presently taxis to a stop and the engines die. The cockpit door opens and the flight attendant comes out, unsnapping her helmet, pushing her goggles up. "Smooth as silk, wasn't it?"

"Very nice," says the fat man.

Still wearing her parachute, the flight attendant hastens back to the tail hatch and opens it. Steps are rolled up and clamped into place. Then comes the slight tilt and vibration caused by someone mounting the steps. "Oh, boy," says the flight attendant disgustedly. Whitcomb and the fat man look back. "It's not Mary and Jess Pokorny after all, honeymooners." A small man enters through the hatch. He is wearing a trench coat and a snap-brimmed hat. "Nor," says the flight attendant, "is it your local Cuban hijacker. Guess who it is." She pauses for effect. "It's Humphrey Bogart, your friendly FFA inspector, come to see if all is well in America's airways."

The inspector carries a flashlight. Without saying anything, he snaps it on and begins examining various enclosures: a small baggage area at the very end of the cabin, the overhead coat and pillow storage, the pouches on the backs of the seats, etc. As he works his way toward Whitcomb and the fat man, the flight attendant calls out, "If either of you have planted a bomb in here, you might as well fess up now, because Humphrey is thorough."

When the inspector reaches the fat man, he says, "May I see your valise please, sir." The fat man hesitates, then hands it over. The inspector rummages among the catalogues and display cards. Presently he holds up a placard of especially rich blue velveteen on which are mounted several medals representing military honors. "Well," says the flight attendant, "I didn't know we had a hero aboard. Why didn't you tell me?"

The inspector replaces the placard in the valise, which he snaps shut and returns to the fat man, who stares straight ahead flushed and chastened. The inspector turns to Whitcomb. "Your purse please, ma'am."

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Whitcomb shakes her head. "No."

The flight attendant sighs loudly. "You might as well go ahead and give it to him. He's got a federal warrant." Whitcomb still holds on to the purse. The flight attendant says, "We will be detained and the aircraft sealed until a federal marshall comes. Besides, ma'am, Humphrey has seen everything that could ever be in a woman's purse—glass eyes, pillow books, dope, dildos, you name it—and he's not going to hassle you about anything unless it affects the safety of the plane." The inspector nods. Whitcomb at last hands over the purse. The inspector unzips it, shines his light down into it, rummages around, pulls out a small dispenser of Mace, and hands the purse back. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I'll have to confiscate this."

The flight attendant shakes her head. "Third one this week, Humphrey. Put in your report that male violence in America is driving women in ever increasing numbers to carry protective devices, some of them potentially as harmful to themselves as to their assailants." The inspector says nothing but only continues to work his way forward, searching. Whitcomb looks ahead stonily, her face drawn. The flight attendant says sotto voce, "Don't give the prying creep the satisfaction of knowing that he has affected you in the slightest." The flight attendant turns to the fat man. "You either. And I'm sorry I made that crack about the medals. It just popped out of my mouth like a little frog." The flight attendant turns quickly and follows the inspector into the cockpit.

In the cabin Whitcomb and the fat man do not look at each other or offer each other any comfort. Out the window there is nothing to see, so they look down at their hands, silent and joyless.

The inspector, done, walks rapidly out of the cockpit, down the aisle, and off the plane. As the flight attendant dogs the hatch behind him, the steps are pulled away with a jerk. A moment later, at the door to the cockpit, the flight attendant turns to her passengers briefly before entering. "Well, it is a kind of rape, but, as you can see, it's routine for the creeps now. They get no more pleasure out of it. And

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it's supposed to be for our own good." She smiles sympathetically, shrugs, and enters the cockpit, closing the door behind her.

II

Somewhere between the Mississippi River and the river Platte, Whitcomb, who has been dozing lightly, awakens to the sound of the cockpit door closing. She looks up just in time to see the flight attendant stride past her down the aisle. She notes that the flight attendant's helmet is snapped tight under the chin and that the goggles are down over her eyes. The flight attendant marches straight back to the tail hatch, opens it, crouches low like a gymnast, and hurls herself out. For a long moment, while Whitcomb and the fat man stare back in amazement, there is a loud sucking sound and everything in the cabin shudders. Then the air catches the hatch and slams it shut with a resounding clank.

Whitcomb looks out the window. Beneath the plane, in the silver moonlight, the parachute bobs and drifts like a lily on a breezy pond. Whitcomb imagines lying on top of it, sinking into its silken folds, and looking up at the chinless smile of the Man in the Moon.

"Looks like a kind of feathery pillow, or a titty, doesn't it?" The fat man wrinkles his brow, self-surprised by his mammary image. But Whitcomb takes no notice. She watches the parachute drift back until it is out of sight. Then she snaps forward in her seat like one who has received an electric shock. Quickly she unbuckles and steps out into the aisle.

"Where're you going?"

"To the cockpit. Here." Whitcomb takes off the rings and hands them back to the fat man. He receives the jewelry distractedly, looking not at it but up at Whitcomb's face. "There's nothing down there but seas of corn and wheat."

"I can't help that." Whitcomb turns and walks with determination up to the cockpit. She opens the door and disappears inside.

Presently the fat man slips the rings into his jacket pocket, sighs, and gets up. Slowly he works his way forward to the flight attendant's area. Rummaging around, he locates the

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little refrigerator and, inside, a bottle of champagne. This and a plastic tumbler he carries back to his seat, stashing them in the pouch in front of him. From his valise he takes out the blue velveteen display card that holds the medals. These he pins expertly above the breast pocket of his jacket—one with a two-bladed propeller mounted atop a Golden Globe, another an aureate scutcheon wreathed in vines, another a purple heart containing a famous profile, and so on, six medals in all, hanging on bright silken ribbons and making, when the fat man moves to take up the champagne again, a tiny, elegant clangor. The fat man holds the bottle between his thighs, pops the cork, and pours himself a glass. "To your health, colonel," he says, in a British accent and drinks. "Tonight, sir, the sky is bedizened with stars, like a strumpet." He drinks again, with pleasure. The effervescent champagne catches the cabin light and bathes the fat man's face in a pale golden glow.

Whitcomb finds the cockpit empty. The control panel is a maze of green lights with a red dot here and there. Numerals pick up the glow and shine white. She sits down in the pilot's seat. Using her native intelligence she begins to reduce the green and white maze to its constituent elements. There is an altimeter. Six thousand feet, it says. There are two fuel gauges, both comfortably above half, an horizon indicator, some control and circuit checks, etc. To her right is the radio, already lit. She locates the volume and turns it up. The radio crackles. A voice reads out some numbers and letters. She finds the tuning knob and sweeps the band—more of the same. She turns the volume back down.

Touching the radio with impunity buoys her confidence. Eventually she will touch other instruments, but now she pauses and looks out the cockpit window. The right side of the nose cowl shines silver in the moonlight. The left is shadowed. But this tells her nothing about her course, no more than the occasional silver cloud sliding under the nose, no more than the momentary glint here and there of ponds and streams below. Above wheel the stars—in a design, she knows, that might be interpreted by a celestial navigator, but to her the stars are even less constellated than the lights of the

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instrument panel. Instrument panel. She smiles and lowers her eyes to the compass. The reading is due west.

Some moments later Whitcomb discovers atop the console separating the pilot and copilot seats a helmet, just like the one the flight attendant wore. She puts it on. It is comfortably snug, lined warmly with a light fleecy material. She fastens the ear flaps under her chin. The hum of the engines slides off into the distance. She lowers the goggles down over her eyes. The lights of the instrument panel become less luminous but more sharply defined, as though the goggles had refractive power. The smell of leather insinuates itself into her nostrils. It seems somehow extraordinarily old. So does the feel of the firm and quilted cushion under her buttocks and thighs.

Whitcomb doesn't know what to do with these sensations. Her body moves randomly, restlessly. Then almost involuntarily, and yet with a sense of deep harmony, Whitcomb lifts her right leg and presses it against the console, which receives it snugly, almost as if furnished with a depression fitted to her form. In front of her she discovers a black oval, the upper half sliced by a wide V so as not to obscure the instrument panel. This truncated wheel, she takes firmly in her hands. She looks straight out over the moonlit cowl.

After a while the sun will spring up behind the plane and make of the wheat fields below a golden tray scratched and striated as with an ancient patina.

Meanwhile, the fat man has finished his champagne and his colloquy with the colonel.

As soon as the sun breaches the horizon, the shadow of the plane will leap far to the west, preceding in the quick eyes of rabbits and prairie dogs the sound of the engines.

Whitcomb surveys all before her. Some hint of warmer light hazes the platinum rings the moon makes in the whirling propellers.

The fat man, with an almost musical riffle of his fingers, sets the medals on his breast to tinkling.

Whitcomb squeezes the wheel and presses her leg hard against the console.

The fat man sits up straight and salutes.

Whitcomb sighs so deeply that she shudders.

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Portfolio

Ugly Girls

Roberto Juarez

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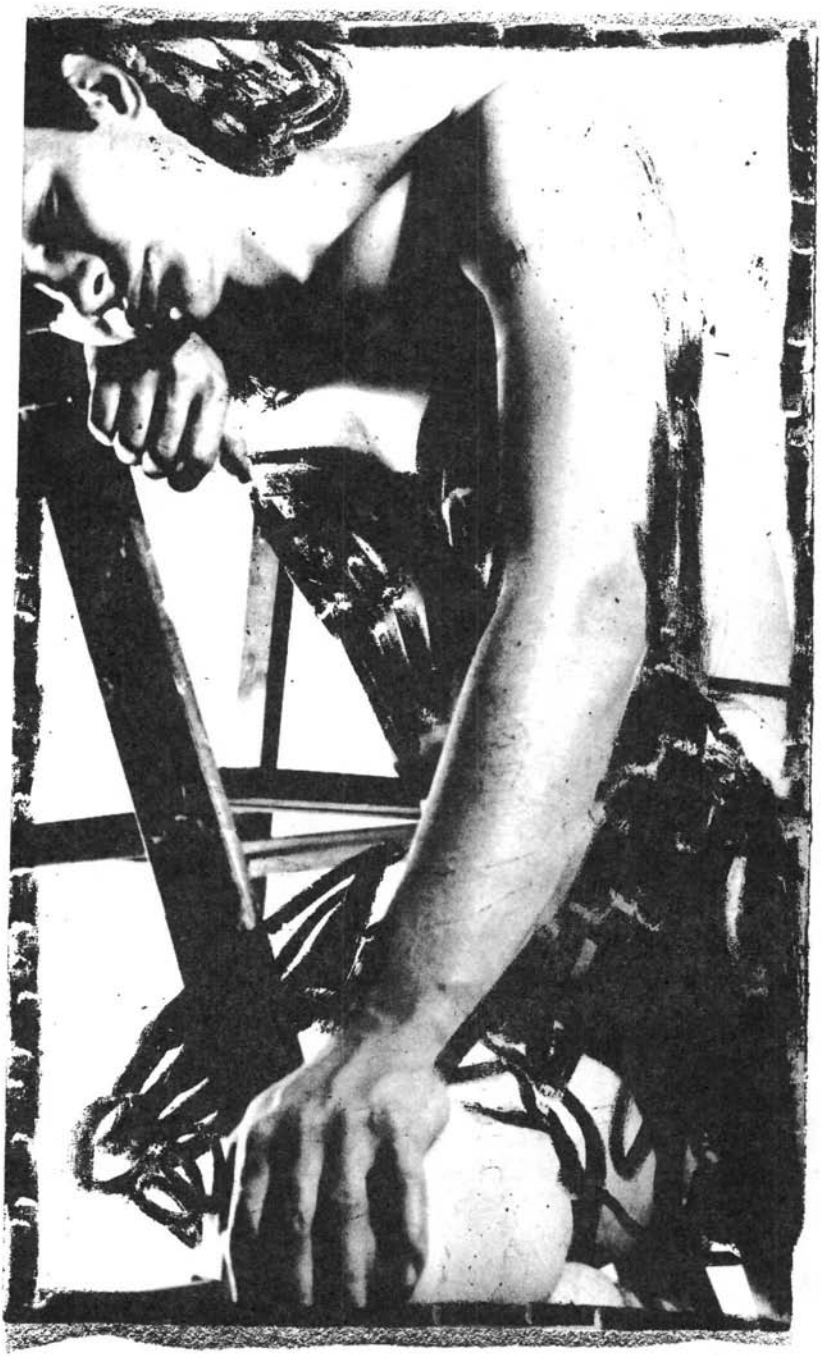

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Forties Flick

The shadows of the venetian blinds on the [illegible] wall,
Shadows of the cacti, of the china animals
Focus the tragic melancholy of the bright stare
Into nowhere, a hole like the black holes in space.
In bra and panties she sidles to the window:
Zip! Up with the blind. A fragile street scene offers itself
With wafer-thin pedetstrians who know where they are going.
The blind comes down slowly, the slats are slowly tilted up.

Why must it always [illegible] this?
A dais with woman reading, with the eddies of her hair
And all that is unsaid about her sucking us back with her
Into the silence that night alone doesn't explain?
Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad
But we didn't have to reinvent these either:
They had gone away into construction of a plot,
The "art" part; [illegible]: knowing what details to leave out
And [illegible]: things too real
To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page
The indoors with the outside becoming part of you
As you realize you had never left off laughing at death,
The "background," dark vine at edge of porch.

Larry and Herman, Herman and Larry, lumber
Greasers, companions, rivals at the [illegible] compnay
Purposely ignorant of so much that is being said
Yet conspirators too in your ambiguity:
What is it like up on the screen?
Do the faces so adroit at the end of their batons of light
Curl up once "The End" has come [illegible]
Or do you figure that by keeping up a front
You will be saved from your own gift of gab
As it becomes time to unravel these old motions
And whatever meant something recedes into the past?

A John Ashbery manuscript page from Self-Portrait In a Convex Mirror, *published in 1975.*

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The shadows of the venetian blinds on the opposite wall,
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Into the silence that night alone doesn't explain?
Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad
But we didn't have to reinvent these either:
They had gone away into construction of a plot,
The "art" part, as it seemed: knowing what details to leave out
And about the development of character: things too real
To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page
The indoors with the outside becoming part of you
As you realize you had never left off laughing at death,
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Larry and Herman, Herman and Larry, lumber
Greasers, companions, rivals at the [illegible] company
Purposely ignorant of so much that is being said
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Thomas Victor

The Art of Poetry XXXIII
John Ashbery

John Ashbery was born in Rochester, New York, on July 28, 1927, and grew up on a farm near Sodus, N.Y. After Deerfield and Harvard, he did graduate work in English at Columbia and in French at N.Y.U. From 1955 until 1965, he lived in France, first as a Fulbright Fellow and later working as art critic for the Paris Herald Tribune. *Since 1965 he has lived in New York, working first as Executive Editor of* Art News, *then as Professor of Writing at Brooklyn College, and now as art critic for* Newsweek.

He has published ten volumes of poetry, the most recent of which is Shadow Train. *His first book,* Some Trees, *was*

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chosen by W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1956. In 1975 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for his Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror. *He is also the author of the novel* A Nest of Ninnies, *written in collaboration with James Schuyler, and of the collection* Three Plays.

The interview was conducted at Mr. Ashbery's apartment in the section of Manhattan known as Chelsea. When I arrived, Mr. Ashbery was away, and the doorman asked me to wait outside. Soon the poet arrived and we went up by elevator to a spacious, well-lighted apartment in which a secretary was hard at work. We sat in easy chairs in the living room, Ashbery with his back to the large windows. The predominant decor was blue and white, and books lined the whole of one wall.

We talked for more than three hours with only one short break for refreshment—soda, tea, water, nothing stronger. Mr. Ashbery's answers to my questions required little editing. He did, however, throughout the conversation give the impression of distraction, as though he wasn't quite sure just what was going on or what his role in the proceedings might be. The interviewer attempted valiantly to extract humorous material, but—as is often the case for readers of Ashbery's poetry—wasn't sure when he succeeded. Since that afternoon a few additional questions were asked and answered, and these have been incorporated into the whole.

INTERVIEWER

I would like to start at the very beginning. When and why did you first decide on a career as a poet?

ASHBERY

I don't think I ever decided on a career as a poet. I began by writing a few little verses, but I never thought any of them would be published or that I would go on to publish books. I was in high school at the time and hadn't read any modern

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poetry. Then in a contest I won a prize in which you could choose different books; the only one which seemed appealing was Untermeyer's anthology, which cost five dollars, a great deal of money. That's how I began reading modern poetry, which wasn't taught in the schools then, especially in rural schools like the one I attended. I didn't understand much of it at first. There were people like Elinor Wylie, whom I found appealing—wonderful craftsmanship—but I couldn't get very far with Auden and Eliot and Stevens. Later I went back to them and started getting their books out of the library. I guess it was just a desire to emulate that started me writing poetry. I can't think of any other reason. I am often asked why I write, and I don't know really—I just want to.

INTERVIEWER

When did you get more serious about it, thinking about publishing and that sort of thing?

ASHBERY

For my last two years of high school, I went to Deerfield Academy, and the first time I saw my work in print was in the school paper there. I had tried painting earlier, but I found that poetry was easier than painting. I must have been fifteen at the time. I remember reading *Scholastic* magazine and thinking I could write better poems than the ones they had in there, but I was never able to get one accepted. Then a student at Deerfield sent in some of my poems under his name to *Poetry* magazine, and when I sent them the same poems a few months later the editors there naturally assumed that I was the plagiarist. Very discouraging. *Poetry* was the most illustrious magazine to be published in at that time, and for a long time after they shunned my work. Then I went on to Harvard and in my second year I met Kenneth Koch. I was trying to get on the *Harvard Advocate*, and he was already one of the editors. He saw my poetry and liked it, and we started reading each other's work. He was really the first poet that I ever knew, so that was rather an important meeting. Of course I published in the *Advocate*, and then in 1949 I had

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a poem published in *Furioso*. That was a major event in my life because, even though it was a relatively small magazine, it did take me beyond the confines of the college. But it was hard to follow that up with other publications, and it really wasn't until my late twenties that I could submit things with some hope of them getting accepted.

INTERVIEWER

Was there ever a time when you thought you would have to make a choice between art criticism and poetry, or have the two just always worked out well together?

ASHBERY

I was never interested in doing art criticism at all—I'm not sure that I am even now. Back in the fifties, Thomas Hess, the editor of *Art News*, had a lot of poets writing for the magazine. One reason was that they paid almost nothing and poets are always penurious. Trained art historians would not write reviews for five dollars, which is what they were paying when I began. I needed some bread at the time—this was in 1957 when I was thirty—and my friends who were already writing for *Art News* suggested that I do it too. So I wrote a review of Bradley Tomlin, an Abstract Expressionist painter who had a posthumous show at the Whitney. After that I reviewed on a monthly basis for a while until I returned to France. Then in 1960 it happened that I knew the woman who was writing art criticism for the *Herald Tribune*. She was going back to live in America and asked if I knew anybody who would like to take over her job. It didn't pay very much, but it enabled me to get other jobs doing art criticism, which I didn't want to do very much, but as so often when you exhibit reluctance to do something, people think you must be very good at it. If I had set out to be an art critic, I might never have succeeded.

INTERVIEWER

Are there any aspects of your childhood that you think might have contributed to making you the poet you are?

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ASHBERY

I don't know what the poet that I am is, very much. I was rather an outsider as a child—I didn't have many friends. We lived out in the country on a farm. I had a younger brother whom I didn't get along with—we were always fighting the way kids do—and he died at the age of nine. I felt guilty because I had been so nasty to him, so that was a terrible shock. These are experiences which have been important to me. I don't know quite how they may have fed into my poetry. My ambition was to be a painter, so I took weekly classes at the art museum in Rochester from the age of about eleven until fifteen or sixteen. I fell deeply in love with a girl who was in the class but who wouldn't have anything to do with me. So I went to this weekly class knowing that I would see this girl, and somehow this being involved with art may have something to do with my poetry. Also, my grandfather was a professor at the University of Rochester, and I lived with them as a small child and went to kindergarten and first grade in the city. I always loved his house; there were lots of kids around, and I missed all this terribly when I went back to live with my parents. Then going back there each week for art class was a returning to things I had thought were lost, and gave me a curious combination of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

INTERVIEWER

These are all rather traumatic things. I think of how most critics seem to see your poetry as rather light-hearted. One critic, however, has spoken of your "rare startlements into happiness." Is happiness so rare in your work?

ASHBERY

Some people wouldn't agree that my poetry is light-hearted. Frank O'Hara once said, "I don't see why Kenneth likes John's work so much because he thinks everything should be funny and John's poetry is about as funny as a wrecked train." In my life I am reasonably happy now. There are days when I think I am not, but I think there are probably more days when I think I am. I was impressed by an Ingmar

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Bergman movie I saw years ago—I can't remember the name of it—in which a woman tells the story of her life, which has been full of tragic experiences. She's telling the story in the dressing room of a theater where she is about to go on and perform in a ballet. At the end of it she says, "But I am happy." Then it says, "The End."

INTERVIEWER

Do you like to tease or play games with the reader?

ASHBERY

Funny you should ask—I just blew up at a critic who asked me the same question, though I shouldn't have, in a list of questions for a book she is compiling of poets' statements. I guess it depends on what you mean by "tease." It's all right if it's done affectionately, though how can this be with someone you don't know? I would like to please the reader, and I think that surprise has to be an element of this, and that may necessitate a certain amount of teasing. To shock the reader is something else again. That has to be handled with great care if you're not going to alienate and hurt him, and I'm firmly against that, just as I disapprove of people who dress with that in mind—dye their hair blue and stick safety pins through their noses and so on. The message here seems to be merely aggression—"hey you can't be part of my strangeness" sort of thing. At the same time I try to dress in a way that is just slightly off, so the spectator, if he notices, will feel slightly bemused but not excluded, remembering his own imperfect mode of dress.

INTERVIEWER

But you would not be above inflicting a trick or a gag on your readers?

ASHBERY

A gag that's probably gone unnoticed turns up in the last sentence of the novel I wrote with James Schuyler. Actually it's my sentence. It reads: "So it was that the cliff dwellers,

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after bidding their cousins good night, moved off towards the parking area, while the latter bent their steps toward the partially rebuilt shopping plaza in the teeth of the freshening foehn." *Foehn* is a kind of warm wind that blows in Bavaria that produces a fog. I would doubt that many people know that. I liked the idea that people, if they bothered to, would have to open the dictionary to find out what the last word in the novel meant. They'd be closing one book and opening another.

INTERVIEWER

Were there older living poets whom you visited, learned from, or studied with as a young writer?

ASHBERY

I particularly admired Auden, whom I would say was the first big influence on my work, more so than Stevens. I wrote an honors thesis on his poetry and got a chance to meet him at Harvard. When I was at Harvard also I studied with Theodore Spencer, a poet who is no longer very well known. He actually taught a poetry-writing workshop, which was very rare in those days—especially at Harvard, where they still are rare. It wasn't that I was particularly fond of Spencer's poetry, but he was a "genuine" poet, a real-live poet, and the feedback I got from him in class was very valuable to me. I also read Elizabeth Bishop quite early and met her once. I wrote her a letter about one of her poems that I had liked and she wrote back, and then after I moved to New York I met her. But I was rather shy about putting myself forward, so there weren't very many known poets then that I did have any contact with. I wish I could have visited older poets! But things were different then—young poets simply didn't send their poems to older ones with requests for advice and criticism and "suggestions for publication." At least I don't think they did—none of the ones I knew did. Everyone is bolder now. This leads to a sad situation (and I've often discussed this with poets of my generation like Kinnell and Merwin) of having a tremendous pile of unanswered correspondence about

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poetry—Kinnell calls it his "guilt pile"—from poets who want help and should receive it; only in this busy world of doing things to make a living and trying to find some time for oneself to write poetry, it isn't usually possible to summon the time and energy it would require to deal seriously with so many requests; at least for me it isn't. But I feel sad because I would like to help; you remember how valuable it would have been for you; and it's an honor to get these requests. People think they have gotten to know you through your poetry and can address you familiarly (I get lots of "Dear John" letters from strangers) and that in itself is a tremendous reward, a satisfaction—if only we could attend to everybody! Actually the one poet I really wanted to know when I was young was Auden. I met him briefly twice after he gave readings at Harvard, and later on in New York saw a bit of him through Chester Kallman who was a great friend of Jimmy Schuyler's but it was very hard to talk to him since he already knew everything. I once said to Kenneth Koch, "What are you supposed to say to Auden?" And he said that about the only thing there was to say was "I'm glad you're alive."

INTERVIEWER

Why is it always Auden?

ASHBERY

It's odd to be asked today what I saw in Auden. Forty years ago when I first began to read modern poetry no one would have asked—he was *the* modern poet. Stevens was a curiosity, Pound probably a monstrosity, William Carlos Williams—who hadn't yet published his best poetry—an "imagist." Eliot and Yeats were too hallowed and anointed to count. I read him at the suggestion of Kathryn Koller, a professor of English at the University of Rochester who was a neighbor of my parents. She had been kind enough to look at my early scribblings and, probably shaking her head over them, suggested Auden as perhaps a kind of antidote. What immediately struck me was his use of colloquial speech—I didn't think you were supposed to do that in poetry. That, and his startling

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way of making abstractions concrete and alive—remember: "Abruptly mounting her ramshackle wheel/Fortune has pedaled furiously away./The sobbing mess is on our hands today," which seem to crystallize the thirties into a few battered and quirky images. And again a kind of romantic tone which took abandoned mines and factory chimneys into account. There is perhaps a note of both childishness and sophistication which struck an answering chord in me. I cannot agree though with the current view that his late work is equal to if not better than the early stuff. Except for "The Sea and the Mirror" there is little that enchants me in the poetry he wrote after coming to America. There are felicities, of course, but on the whole it's *too* chatty and too self-congratulatory at not being "poetry with a capital P," as he put it. Auden was of two minds about my own work. He once said he never understood a line of it. On the other hand he published *Some Trees* in the Yale Younger Poets Series. You'll remember, though, that he once said in later life that one of his early works, *The Orators*, must have been written by a madman.

INTERVIEWER

Tell me about the New York School—were there regular meetings, perhaps classes or seminars? Did you plot to take over the literary world?

ASHBERY

No. This label was foisted upon us by a man named John Bernard Myers, who ran the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and published some pamphlets of our poems. I found out recently from one of my students that Myers coined the term in 1961 in an article he wrote for a little magazine in California called *Nomad*. I think the idea was that, since everybody was talking about the New York School of painting, if he created a New York School of poets then they would automatically be considered important because of the sound of the name. But by that time I was living in France, and wasn't part of what was happening in New York. I don't think we ever were a school.

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There are vast differences between my poetry and Koch's and O'Hara's and Schuyler's and Guest's. We were a bunch of poets who happened to know each other; we would get together and read our poems to each other and sometimes we would write collaborations. It never occurred to us that it would be possible to take over the literary world, so that was not part of the plan. Somebody wrote an article about the New York School a few years ago in the *Times Book Review*, and a woman wrote in to find out how she could enroll.

INTERVIEWER

What was your relation to Paris at the time when you were there—you used to drink Coca-Colas . . .

ASHBERY

That question probably requires a book-length essay. I did at one point in Paris develop an addiction to Coca-Cola which I've never had before or since, but I don't know whether that was due to nostalgia for America or the fact that the French like it so much. Paris is "the city," isn't it, and I am a lover of cities. It can be experienced much more pleasantly and conveniently than any other city I know. It's so easy to get around on the metro, and so interesting when you get there—each arrondissement is like a separate province, with its own capital and customs and even costumes. I used to pick a different section to explore and set out on a mini-expedition, often with a movie theater in mind where they were showing some movie I wanted to see, often an old Laurel and Hardy film since I love them, especially when dubbed into French with comic American accents. And then there is always a principal café in the neighborhood where you can sample some nice wine and look at the people. You get to know a lot of life this way. Sometimes I would do a Proustian excursion, looking at buildings he or his characters had lived in. Like his childhood home in the Boulevard Malesherbes or Odette's house in the rue La Pérouse.

I didn't have many friends the first years I was there—they were mainly the American writers Harry Mathews and Elliott

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Stein, and Pierre Martory, a French writer with whom I lived for the last nine of the ten years I spent in France, and who has remained a very close friend. He once published a novel but never anything after that, though the novel was well received and he continues to write voluminously—poems, novels, and stories which he produces constantly but never tries to publish or show to anybody, even me—the only writer of that kind I've ever met. I've translated a few of his poems but they haven't appeared in France where they don't fit in with the cliques that prevail there. Some were published in *Locus Solus*, a small magazine Harry Mathews and I edited—the title is taken from a novel by Raymond Roussel whom we both loved and on whom I was once going to do a dissertation. A little later I met Anne and Rodrigo Moynihan, English painters who live mostly in France, who sponsored a review called *Art and Literature* which I helped to edit. They too have remained close friends whom I see often. I return to Pierre—most of my knowledge of France and things French comes from him. He is a sort of walking encyclopedia of French culture but at the same time views it all from a perspective that is somewhat American. He once spent six months in New York working for *Paris Match*, for which he still works, and we sailed back to France together on the S.S. *France*. When he set foot on French soil at Le Havre he said, "It is so wonderful to be back in France! *I hate ze French!*"

INTERVIEWER

What early reading did you do, say in high school or college, that has stayed with you?

ASHBERY

Like many young people, I was attracted by long novels. My grandfather had several sets of Victorian writers in his house. The first long novel I read was *Vanity Fair*, and I liked it so much that I decided to read *Gone with the Wind*, which I liked too. I read Dickens and George Eliot then, but not very much poetry. I didn't really get a feeling for the poetry of the past until I had discovered modern poetry. Then I began to

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see how nineteenth-century poetry wasn't just something lifeless in an ancient museum but must have grown out of the lives of the people who wrote it. In college I majored in English and read the usual curriculum. I guess I was particularly attracted to the Metaphysical poets and to Keats, and I had a Chaucer course which I enjoyed very much. I also had a modern poetry course from F. O. Matthiessen, which is where I really began to read Wallace Stevens. I wrote a paper, I recall, on "Chocorua to Its Neighbor." Mostly I wasn't a very good student and just sort of got by—laziness. I read Proust for a course with Harry Levin, and that was a major shock.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

ASHBERY

I don't know. I started reading it when I was twenty (before I took Levin's course) and it took me almost a year. I read very slowly anyway, but particularly in the case of a writer whom I wanted to read every word of. It's just that I think one ends up feeling sadder and wiser in equal proportions when one is finished reading him—I can no longer look at the world in quite the same way.

INTERVIEWER

Were you attracted by the intimate, meditative voice of his work?

ASHBERY

Yes, and the way somehow everything could be included in this vast, open form that he created for himself—particularly certain almost surreal passages. There's one part where a philologist or specialist on place-names goes on at great length concerning place-names in Normandy. I don't know why it is so gripping, but it seizes the way life sometimes seems to have of droning on in a sort of dream-like space. I also identified, on account of the girl in my art class, with the narrator, who had a totally impractical passion which some-

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how both enveloped the beloved like a cocoon and didn't have much to do with her.

INTERVIEWER

You said a minute ago that reading modern poetry enabled you to see the vitality present in older poetry. In your mind, is there a close connection between life and poetry?

ASHBERY

In my case I would say there is a very close but oblique connection. I have always been averse to talking about myself, and so I don't write about my life the way the confessional poets do. I don't want to bore people with experiences of mine that are simply versions of what everybody goes through. For me, poetry starts after that point. I write with experiences in mind, but I don't write about them, I write out of them. I know that I have exactly the opposite reputation, that I am totally self-involved, but that's not the way I see it.

INTERVIEWER

You have often been characterized as a solipsist, and I wonder if this isn't related to your reputation for obscurity. The way the details of a poem will be so clear, but the context, the surrounding situation, unclear. Perhaps this is more a matter of perspective than any desire to befuddle.

ASHBERY

This is the way that life appears to me, the way that experience happens. I can concentrate on the things in this room and our talking together, but what the context is is mysterious to me. And it's not that I want to make it more mysterious in my poems—really, I just want to make it more photographic. I often wonder if I am suffering from some mental dysfunction because of how weird and baffling my poetry seems to so many people and sometimes to me too. Let me read you a comment which appeared in a review of my most recent book, from some newspaper in Virginia. It says: "John Ashbery is emerging as a very important poet, if not by

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unanimous critical consent then certainly by the admiration and awe he inspires in younger poets. Oddly, no one understands Ashbery." That is a simplification, but in a sense it is true, and I wonder how things happened that way. I'm not the person who knows. When I originally started writing, I expected that probably very few people would read my poetry because in those days people didn't read poetry much anyway. But I also felt that my work was not beyond understanding. It seemed to me rather derivative of or at least in touch with contemporary poetry of the time, and I was quite surprised that nobody seemed to see this. So I live with this paradox: on the one hand, I am an important poet, read by younger writers, and on the other hand, nobody understands me. I am often asked to account for this state of affairs, but I can't.

INTERVIEWER

When you say that sometimes you think your poetry is weird, what do you mean exactly?

ASHBERY

Every once in a while I will pick up a page and it has something, but what is it? It seems so unlike what poetry "as we know it" is. But at other moments I feel very much at home with it. It's a question of a sudden feeling of unsureness at what I am doing, wondering why I am writing the way I am, and also not feeling the urge to write in another way.

INTERVIEWER

Is the issue of meaning or message something that is uppermost in your mind when you write?

ASHBERY

Meaning yes, but message no. I think my poems mean what they say, and whatever might be implicit within a particular passage, but there is no message, nothing I want to tell the world particularly except what I am thinking when I am writing. Many critics tend to want to see an allegorical meaning in every concrete statement, and if we just choose a line

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at random, I think we will find this isn't the way it works. . . . I can't seem to find anything that's an example of what I mean. Well, let's take this . . . no. Everything I look at does seem to mean something other than what is being said, all of a sudden. Ah, here—the beginning of "Daffy Duck in Hollywood," for instance, where all these strange objects avalanche into the poem. I meant them to be there for themselves, and not for some hidden meaning. Rumford's Baking Powder (by the way, it's actually Rumford and not Rumford's Baking Powder. I knew that, but preferred the sound of my version—I don't usually do that), a celluloid earring, Speedy Gonzales—they are just the things that I selected to be exhibited in the poem at that point. In fact, there is a line here, "The allegory comes unsnarled too soon," that might be my observation of poetry and my poetry in particular. The allegory coming unsnarled meaning that the various things that make it up are dissolving into a poetic statement, and that is something I feel is both happening and I don't want to happen. And, as so often, two opposing forces are working to cancel each other out. "Coming unsnarled" is probably a good thing, but "too soon" isn't.

INTERVIEWER

So for you a poem is an object in and of itself rather than a clue to some abstraction, to something other than itself?

ASHBERY

Yes, I would like it to be what Stevens calls a completely new set of objects. My intention is to present the reader with a pleasant surprise, not an unpleasant one, not a non-surprise. I think this is the way pleasure happens when you are reading poetry. Years ago Kenneth Koch and I did an interview with each other, and something I said then, in 1964, is pertinent to what we are talking about. "It's rather hard to be a good artist and also be able to explain intelligently what your art is about. In fact, the worse your art is, the easier it is to talk about, at least I would like to think so. Ambiguity seems to be the same thing as happiness or pleasant surprise. I am

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assuming that from the moment life cannot be one continual orgasm, real happiness is impossible, and pleasant surprise is promoted to the front rank of the emotions. The idea of relief from pain has something to do with ambiguity. Ambiguity supposes eventual resolution of itself whereas certitude implies further ambiguity. I guess that is why so much 'depressing' modern art makes me feel cheerful."

INTERVIEWER

Could you explain the paradox concerning ambiguity and certitude?

ASHBERY

Things are in a continual state of motion and evolution, and if we come to a point where we say, with certitude, right here, this is the end of the universe, then of course we must deal with everything that goes on after that, whereas ambiguity seems to take further developments into account. We might realize that the present moment may be one of an eternal or sempiternal series of moments, all of which will resemble it because, in some ways, they are the present, and won't in other ways, because the present will be the past by that time.

INTERVIEWER

Is it bothersome that critics seem to have considerable trouble saying exactly what your poems are about?

ASHBERY

You have probably read David Bromwich's review of *As We Know* in the *Times*. He decided that the entire book deals with living in a silver age rather than a golden age. This is an idea that occurs only briefly, along with a great many other things, in "Litany." By making this arbitrary decision he was able to deal with the poetry. I intended, in "Litany," to write something so utterly discursive that it would be beyond criticism—not because I wanted to punish critics, but because this would somehow exemplify the fullness, or, if you wish,

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the emptiness, of life, or, at any rate, its dimensionless quality. And I think that any true work of art does defuse criticism; if it left anything important to be said, it wouldn't be doing its job. (This is not an idea I expect critics to sympathize with, especially at a time when criticism has set itself up as a separate branch of the arts, and, perhaps by implication, the most important one.) The poem is of an immense length, and there is a lack of coherence between the parts. Given all this, I don't really see how one could deal critically with the poem, so I suppose it is necessary for the critic to draw up certain guidelines before beginning. It was a very sympathetic review, and I admire Bromwich, but it seemed to leave a great deal out of account. I guess I am pleased that my method has given every critic something to hate or like. For me, my poems have their own form, which is the one that I want, even though other people might not agree that it is there. I feel that there is always a resolution in my poems.

INTERVIEWER

Did you see the controversy that erupted in the *New York Review* about how "Litany" should be read? Whether one should read all of voice A, then all of voice B, or intermingle them in some way. . .

ASHBERY

I don't think there is any particular way. I seem to have opened up a can of worms with my instruction, which the publisher asked me to put in, that the parts should be read simultaneously. I don't think people ever read things the way they are supposed to. I myself will skip ahead several chapters, or read a little bit of this page and a little bit of that page, and I assume that is what everybody does. I just wanted the whole thing to be, as I have said, presentable; it's not a form that has a cohesive structure, so it could be read just as one pleases. I think I consider the poem as a sort of environment, and one is not obliged to take notice of every aspect of one's environment—one can't, in fact. That is why it came out the way it did.

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INTERVIEWER

One's environment at a single moment?

ASHBERY

No, it is a succession of moments. I am always impressed by how difficult and yet how easy it is to get from one moment to the next of one's life—particularly while traveling, as I just was in Poland. There is a problem every few minutes—one doesn't know whether one is going to get on the plane, or will they confiscate one's luggage. Somehow I did all this and got back, but I was aware of so much difficulty, and at the same time of the pleasure, the novelty of it all. Susan Sontag was at this writers' conference also—there were just four of us—and one night in Warsaw we were provided with tickets to a ballet. I said, "Do you think we should go? It doesn't sound like it will be too interesting." And she said, "Sure, we should go. If it is boring that will be interesting too"—which turned out to be the case.

INTERVIEWER

Given what you said about "Litany," it seems that in a way you are leaving it up to each reader to make his or her own poem out of the raw materials you have given. Do you visualize an ideal reader when you write, or do you conceive of a multitude of different apprehending sensibilities?

ASHBERY

Every writer faces the problem of the person that he is writing for, and I think nobody has ever been able to imagine satisfactorily who this "*homme moyen sensuel*" will be. I try to aim at as wide an audience as I can so that as many people as possible will read my poetry. Therefore I depersonalize it, but in the same way personalize it, so that a person who is going to be different from me but is also going to resemble me just because he is different from me, since we are all different from each other, can see something in it. You know—I shot an arrow into the air but I could only aim it. Often after I have given a poetry reading, people will say, "I never really got anything out of your work before, but now that I have

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heard you read it, I can see something in it." I guess something about my voice and my projection of myself meshes with the poems. That is nice, but it is also rather saddening because I can't sit down with every potential reader and read aloud to him.

INTERVIEWER

Your poems often have a spoken quality, as though they are monologues or dialogues. Do you try to create characters who then speak in your poems, or is this all your own voice? In the dialogues perhaps it is two aspects of your own voice that are speaking.

ASHBERY

It doesn't seem to me like my voice. I have had many arguments about this with my analyst, who is actually a South American concert pianist, more interested in playing the piano than in being a therapist. He says, "Yes, I know, you always think that these poems come from somewhere else. You refuse to realize that it is really you that is writing the poems and not having them dictated by some spirit somewhere." It is hard for me to realize that because I have such an imprecise impression of what kind of a person I am. I know I appear differently to other people because I behave differently on different occasions. Some people think that I am very laid-back and charming and some people think I am egotistical and disagreeable. Or as Edward Lear put it in his great poem "How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear": "Some think him ill-tempered and queer, but a few find him pleasant enough." Any of the above, I suppose. Of course, my reason tells me that my poems are not dictated, that I am not a voyant. I suppose they come from a part of me that I am not in touch with very much except when I am actually writing. The rest of the time I guess I want to give this other person a rest, this other one of my selves that does the talking in my poems, so that he won't get tired and stop.

INTERVIEWER

So you have a sense of several selves?

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ASHBERY

No, no more than the average person I shouldn't think. I mean, we are all different depending on who we happen to be with and what we are doing at a particular moment, but I wouldn't say that it goes any further than that.

INTERVIEWER

Some people have thought that you set up characters who converse in several poems. One could say that in "Litany" you have character A and character B, who are very similar to one another. It is possible at times to see them as lovers on the point of separating, while at other times they look like two aspects of one personality.

ASHBERY

I think I am trying to reproduce the polyphony that goes on inside me, which I don't think is radically different from that of other people. After all, one is constantly changing one's mind and thereby becoming something slightly different. But what was I doing? Perhaps the two columns are like two people whom I am in love with simultaneously. A student of mine who likes this poem says that when you read one column you start to "miss" the other one, as you would miss one beloved when you spend time with the other. I once half-jokingly said that my object was to direct the reader's attention to the white space between the columns. Maybe that's part of it. Reading is a pleasure, but to finish reading, to come to the blank space at the end, is also a pleasure.

INTERVIEWER

This notion of your poems being dictated makes me wonder whether for you composition involves something like inspiration, the poems just springing out already finished, rather than a laborious process of writing and revision.

ASHBERY

That is the way it has happened to me in more recent times. In fact, since I don't have very much free time (poets

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seldom do, since they must somehow make a living), I've conditioned myself to write at almost any time. Sometimes it doesn't work, but on the whole I feel that poetry is going on all the time inside, an underground stream. One can let down one's bucket and bring the poem back up. (This is very well put in a passage that occurs early on in Heimito von Doderer's novel *The Demons*, which I haven't to hand at the moment.) It will be not dissimilar to what I have produced before because it is coming from the same source, but it will be dissimilar because of the different circumstances of the particular moment.

INTERVIEWER

Many poets have spoken of poetry coming from the subconscious mind rather than the conscious mind. Would you agree with that?

ASHBERY

I think that is where it probably starts out, but I think that in my case it passes through the conscious mind on its way out and is monitored by it. I don't believe in automatic writing as the Surrealists were supposed to have practiced it, simply because it is not a reflection of the whole mind, which is partly logical and reasonable, and that part should have its say too.

INTERVIEWER

Do you compose on the typewriter or in longhand?

ASHBERY

I write on the typewriter. I didn't use to, but when I was writing "The Skaters," the lines became unmanageably long. I would forget the end of the line before I could get to it. It occured to me that perhaps I should do this at the typewriter, because I can type faster than I can write. So I did, and that is mostly the way I have written ever since. Occasionally I write a poem in longhand to see whether I can still do it. I don't want to be forever bound to this machine.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you have rituals?

ASHBERY

Well, one of them is to use this very old, circa 1930 I would say, Royal typewriter I mentioned. I hate to think what will happen when it finally gives out though you can still find them sometimes in those used office furniture stores on West 23rd Street, which are themselves an endangered species. And then I procrastinate like everybody else, though surely more than most. On days when I want to write I will usually waste the morning and go for an afternoon walk to Greenwich Village. (I live near by in Chelsea, which is a pleasant place to walk from though maybe not to.) Sometimes this takes too long and my preferred late afternoon moment will pass. I can't really work at night. Nor in the morning, very much, when I have more ideas but am less critical of them, it seems. I never can use the time I waste doing this for some other purpose like answering letters. It's no good for anything but wasting. I've never tried Schiller's rotten apples, but I do drink tea while I write, and that is about the only time I do drink tea. On the whole, I believe I have fewer hangups and rituals than I used to. I feel blocked much less often, though it still happens. It's important to try to write when you are in the wrong mood or the weather is wrong. Even if you don't succeed you'll be developing a muscle that may do it later on. And I think writing does get easier as you get older. It's a question of practice and also of realizing you don't have the oceans of time to waste you had when you were young.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise your poems heavily?

ASHBERY

Not any more. I used to labor over them a great deal, but because of my strong desire to avoid all unnecessary work, I have somehow trained myself not to write something that I will either have to discard or be forced to work a great deal

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over. In fact, just last night a friend mentioned that she has a manuscript copy of one of my early poems, "Le livre est sur la table," with a lot of corrections in it. I remember that poem as one that gave me an immense amount of difficulty—I worked over it for a week or so and never did feel really happy with it. When she mentioned that, I realized how much my way of writing has changed over the last thirty years. But, although there are poems even today that I don't find satisfactory once I have finished them, most of the corrections I make are pretty minor. I like the idea of being as close to the original thought or voice as possible and not to falsify it by editing. Here is something I just read by Max Jacob, quoted by André Salmon in the notes to Jacob's book *La Défense de Tartuffe*. He talks about composing novels or stories in a notebook while taking long walks through Paris. I'll translate: "The ideas I found in this way seemed sacred to me and I didn't change a comma. I believe that prose which comes directly from meditation is a prose which has the form of the brain and which it is forbidden to touch."

INTERVIEWER

What determines a line break for you? Is there some metrical consideration, or would you say you are writing free verse?

ASHBERY

I don't know. I just know when I feel the line should break. I used to say that my criterion for a line of poetry was that it should have at least two interesting things in it. But this is not the case in a lot of my recent poetry. In "Litany" there are lines that are a single word long. As I was writing that poem—well, actually it began with the long poem before that, the "Nut-Brown Maid"—I became almost intoxicated by the idea of the line break. It seemed as if I were writing just to get to this point, this decision. But, although the line break is very important to me, I don't really understand how I know when it is supposed to happen. I have felt very uncomfortable with iambic pentameter ever since I discovered, when I first began writing poetry, that it was not impossible

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to write acceptable blank verse. It somehow seems to falsify poetry for me. It has an order of its own that is foreign to nature. When I was in college, I used to write a kind of four-beat line, which seemed much more real, genuine, to me. Now I guess it is free verse, whatever that is.

INTERVIEWER

What gets you started in writing a poem? Is it an idea, an image, a rhythm, a situation or event, a phrase, something else?

ASHBERY

Again, all of the above. An idea might occur to me, something very banal—for example, isn't it strange that it is possible to both talk and think at the same time? That might be an idea for a poem. Or certain words or phrases might have come to my attention with a meaning I wasn't aware of before. Also, I often put in things that I have overheard people say, on the street for instance. Suddenly something fixes itself in the flow that is going on around one and seems to have a significance. In fact, there is an example of that in this poem, "What Is Poetry." In a bookstore I overheard a boy saying to a girl this last line: "It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?" I have no idea what the context was, but it suddenly seemed the way to end my poem. I am a believer in fortuitous accidents. The ending of my poem "Clepsydra," the last two lines, came from a notebook that I kept a number of years before, during my first trip to Italy. I actually wrote some poems while I was traveling, which I don't usually do, but I was very excited by my first visit there. So years later, when I was trying to end "Clepsydra" and getting very nervous, I happened to open that notebook and found these two lines that I had completely forgotten about: "while morning is still and before the body / Is changed by the faces of evening." They were just what I needed at that time. But it doesn't really matter so much what the individual thing is. Many times I will jot down ideas and phrases, and then when I am ready to write I can't find them. But it doesn't make any difference,

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because whatever comes along at that time will have the same quality. Whatever was there is replaceable. In fact, often in revising I will remove the idea that was the original stimulus. I think I am more interested in the movement among ideas than in the ideas themselves, the way one goes from one point to another rather than the destination or the origin.

INTERVIEWER

Three Poems is largely prose, prose poetry, rather than verse. Some readers would object rather strenuously to calling it poetry. Within this kind of form, I am wondering where, for you, the poetry specifically is to be found? What is the indispensible element that makes poetry?

ASHBERY

That is one of those good but unanswerable questions. For a long time a very prosaic language, a language of ordinary speech, has been in my poetry. It seems to me that we are most ourselves when we are talking, and we talk in a very irregular and anti-literary way. In *Three Poems*, I wanted to see how poetic the most prosaic language could be. And I don't mean just the journalese, but also the inflated rhetoric that is trying very hard to sound poetic but not making it. One of my aims has been to put together as many different kinds of language and tone as possible, and to shift them abruptly, to overlap them all. There is a very naïve, romantic tone at times, all kinds of clichés, as well as a more deliberate poetic voice. I also was in a way reacting to the minimalism of some of the poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*, such as "Europe," which is sometimes just a few scattered words. I suppose I eventually thought of covering page after page with words, with not even any break for paragraphs in many cases —could I do this and still feel that I was getting the satisfaction that poetry gives me? I don't quite understand why some people are so against prose poetry, which is certainly a respectable and pedigreed form of poetry. In fact, too much so for my taste. I had written almost none before *Three Poems* because there always seemed to be a kind of rhetorical false-

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ness in much that had been done in the past—Baudelaire's, for instance. I wanted to see if prose poetry could be written without that self-conscious drama that seems so much a part of it. So if it is poetic, it is probably because it tries to stay close to the way we talk and think without expecting what we say to be recorded or remembered. The pathos and liveliness of ordinary human communication is poetry to me.

INTERVIEWER

You were talking once about reading younger poets and being aware that you have influenced their work. You said one of the primary benefits for you in seeing this is that it alerts you to watch out for "Ashberyisms" in your own work. What do you mean by Ashberyisms?

ASHBERY

Well, there are certain stock words that I have found myself using a great deal. When I become aware of them, it is an alarm signal meaning I was falling back on something that had served in the past—it is a sign of not thinking at the present moment, not that there is anything intrinsically bad about certain words or phrases. The word "climate" occurs in my poetry a great deal, for instance. So I try to censor it, unless I feel that there is no alternative. I also seem to be very fond of words involving a kind of osmosis, like "absorb" and "leach," as something leaching into the soil. I don't know why these particular words attract me, unless it's because they are indicative of the slow but kinetic quality of existence and experience. Also there is a typical kind of tone, the chatty quality that my poetry tends to have, the idea behind it being that there are things more important than "all this fiddle," perhaps, and sometimes I correct this.

INTERVIEWER

I suppose there are many things we might expect from a poet who has so strong an interest in painting as you do. Various critics have suggested that you are a mannerist in words, or an Abstract Expressionist. Are you conscious of anything

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like that—or perhaps of performing a Cubist experiment with words?

ASHBERY

I suppose the "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" is a mannerist work in what I hope is the good sense of the word. Later on, mannerism became mannered, but at first it was a pure novelty—Parmigianino was an early Mannerist, coming right on the heels of Michaelangelo. I have probably been influenced, more or less unconsciously I suppose, by the modern art that I have looked at. Certainly the simultaneity of cubism is something that has rubbed off on me, as well as the Abstract Expressionist idea that the work is a sort of record of its own coming-into-existence; it has an "anti-referential sensuousness," but it is nothing like flinging a bucket of words on the page, as Pollock did with paint. It is more indirect than that. When I was fresh out of college, Abstract Expressionism was the most exciting thing in the arts. There was also experimental music and film, but poetry seemed quite conventional in comparison. I guess it still is, in a way. One can accept a Picasso woman with two noses, but an equivalent attempt in poetry baffles the same audience.

INTERVIEWER

Though it has its admirers, *The Tennis Court Oath* seems to have been a widely disliked book—for its difficulty, its obscurity, and so on. How do you feel about that volume from the perspective of today?

ASHBERY

There are a lot of poems in that book that don't interest me as much as those that came before or since. I didn't expect to have a second book published, ever. The opportunity came about very suddenly, and when it did I simply sent what I had been doing. But I never expected these poems to see the light of day. I felt at that time that I needed a change in the way I was writing, so I was kind of fooling around and trying to do something I hadn't done before. I was conscious that often

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what I hadn't done before was inferior to what I had done. But I like a number of the poems in the book. I hadn't realized this until recently, but there was a period, after I had begun living in Paris and decided that I wanted to write in a different way, when I achieved a kind of intermediate style, say between the poems in *Some Trees* and the poem "Europe." For instance, the poem "They Dream Only of America" or "Our Youth" or "How Much Longer Will I Be Able to Inhabit the Divine Sepulcher. . . ." Those are the earlier poems in *The Tennis Court Oath*. I don't know quite why I stopped writing that way, but I feel that those are valid poems in a new way that I might well have gone on pursuing, but didn't. In the last two or three years, I have gone back and reread some of the poems which I hadn't liked before and decided that they did have something that I could work on again. I think I did this somewhat in "Litany." There are certainly things in that poem that are as outrageous as the poems that outraged the critics of *The Tennis Court Oath*.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about the general critical reception of your work?

ASHBERY

I am very pleased that my poems seem to have found readers. I don't know quite how this came about. But it is disappointing to me that my poetry has become a kind of shibboleth, that people feel they have to join one side or the other. It seems to me that the poetry gets lost in all the controversy that surrounds it. I feel often that people on both sides are much more familiar with the myth that has grown up about my work than they are with the work itself. I am either an inspired seer or a charlatan who is trying to torment readers. My work has become a sort of political football and has the quality of a red flag for some people before they have even begun to pay any attention to it. I suppose that is the way reputations, some of them anyway, are created, but I hate to see people intimidated before they even have begun to

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read me by their preconceived notion of what my poetry is. I think it has something to offer, that it was not written not to be read.

INTERVIEWER

Have you found that your students ever taught you anything about writing?

ASHBERY

I try to avoid the well-known cliché that you learn from your students. Neither do I believe that there's something ennobling for a writer to teach, that it's narcissistic to spend time wallowing in your writing when you could be out helping in the world's work. Writers should write, and poets especially spend altogether too much time at other tasks such as teaching. However, since so many of us have to do it, there are certain things to be said for it. You are forced to bring a critical attention into play when you are reading students' work that you would not use otherwise, and that can help when you return to your own writing. And being immersed in a group of young unproven writers who are fiercely serious about what they are doing can have a chastening effect sometimes on us blasé oldsters. Besides, they may be writing great poetry, only nobody knows it because nobody has seen it yet. I sometimes think that the "greatness" my friends and I used to see in each other's poetry when we were very young had a lot to do with the fact that it was unknown. It could turn out to be anything; the possibilities were limitless, more so than when we were at last discovered and identified and pinned down in our books.

—**Peter Stitt**

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John Ashbery

Rain Moving In

The blackboard is erased in the attic
And the wind turns up the light of the stars,
Sinewy now. Someone will find out, someone will know.
And if somewhere on this great planet
The truth is discovered, a patch of it, dried, glazed by
the sun,
It will just hang on, in its own infamy, humility. No one
Will be better for it, but things can't get any worse.
Just keep playing, mastering as you do the step
Into disorder this one meant. Don't you see
It's all we can do? Meanwhile, great fires
Arise, as of haystacks aflame. The dial has been set
And that's ominous, but all your graciousness in living
Conspires with it, now that this is our home:
A place to be from, and have people ask about.

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Two Poems by Jonathan Cott

Here, There, Everywhere

In the other world
You're holding a bubble in your hands
It reflects everything as it grows
I can see you in it
And I'm looking through your eyes

Childhood

I'm beside you in the world of before
Eyes going back to see you
Where you are now
Passing colors through your heart
Resting where I get smaller

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Five Poems by Gerald Stern

Leaving Another Kingdom

I think this year I'll wait for the white lilacs
before I get too sad.
I'll let the daffodils go, flower by flower,
and the blue squill go, and the primroses.
Levine will be here by then,
waving fountain pens, carrying rolled-up posters
of Ike Williams and King Levinsky.
He will be reaching into his breast pocket
for maps of grim Toledo
showing the downtown grilles and the bus stations.
He and I together
will get on our hands and knees
on the warm ground
in the muddy roses
under the thorn tree.
We will walk the mile to my graveyard
without one word of regret,
two rich poets
going over the past a little,
changing a thing or two,
making a few connections,
doing it all with balance,
stopping along the way to pet a wolf,
slowing down at the locks,
giving each other lectures on early technology,
mentioning eels and snakes,
touching a little on our two cities,
cursing our Henrys a little,
his Ford, my Frick,
being almost human about it, almost decent,
sliding over the stones to reach the island,

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throwing spears on the way,
staring for twenty minutes at two robins
starting a life together in rural Pennsylvania,
kicking a heavy tire, square and monstrous,
huge and soggy, maybe a 49 Hudson,
maybe a 40 Packard, maybe a Buick
with mohair seats and silken cords
and tiny panes of glass—both of us seeing
the same car, each of us driving
our own brick road, both of us whistling
the same idiotic songs, the tops of trees flying,
houses sailing along, the way they did then,
both of us walking down to the end of the island
so we could put our feet in the water, so I could
show him where the current starts, so we could
look for bottles and worn-out rubbers, Trojans
full of holes, the guarantee run out—
love gone slack and love gone flat—
a few feet away from New Jersey near the stones
that look like large white turtles guarding the entrance
to the dangerous channel where those lovers—Tristan
and his Isolt, Troilus and you know who,
came roaring by on inner tubes, their faces
wet with happiness, the shrieks and sighs
left up the river somewhere, now their fingers
trailing through the wake, now their arms out
to keep themselves from falling, now in the slow part
past the turtles and into the bend, we sitting there
putting on our shoes, he with Nikes,
me with Georgia loggers, standing up
and smelling the river, walking single file
until we reach the pebbles, singing in French
all the way back, losing the robins forever,
losing the Buick, walking into the water,
leaving another island, leaving another
retreat, leaving another kingdom.

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Vivaldi Years

I lay forever, didn't I, behind those old windows,
listening to Bach and resurrecting my life.
I slept sometimes for thirty or forty minutes
while the violins shrieked and the cellos trembled.
It was a crazy youth, wasn't it, letting
my mind soar like that, giving myself
up to poetry the way I did.
It was a little like Goethe's, wasn't it,
a little like Eugene O'Neill's, one joyous
sadness after another. That was the everlasting
life, wasn't it. The true world without end.

Saying the First Words

I could live like that,
putting my chair by the window,
making my tea,
letting the light in,
trapping the spider in my left hand.

I could pull the one book down
and find my place inside the four worlds
and face the wrong way
and live forever by mercy and wisdom.

I could love the pine tree,
and the road going back and forth like a blue thread,
and the fire inside the hills,
and the grass going down to the river—my wildest dream.

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For Song

I am sitting thirty feet above the water
with my hand at my throat,
listening to the owls go through the maples
and the seaplanes go up and down like cracked buzzsaws.

I am finding my own place
in the scheme of things
between the nation of Ruben half drunk on twisted cone flowers
and the nation of Dan all crazy for weird veronica.

I am paying attention to providence,
the silver hordes this time,
the mud up to my knees,
the glass on my fingers.

I am studying paradise and the hereafter,
a life beyond compare,
a great log thrown up for my own pleasure,
an unbelievably large and cold and beneficent sun.

I am lifting a blade of grass to my wet lips
for music;
I am trying a dozen fruits and flowers
to get one sound;

I am twisting my head around, I am slowly clapping
for harmony;
I am raising my eyes, I am listening to the worms
for sound.

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Near Perigord

On the first day of viburnum
I followed a school bus for five miles
past the magnolias and the copper lions
to the shad-men rocking and sleeping in their bleached
boats.
I had just read Pound again and I was thinking
of his brain floating by me in the universe
and his dead body lying face up at Rapallo.
I picked him some violets, for his bitter nose,
and one or two strands of dry forsythia
for his empty hands, something to wave and wave
as he did his bitter business with Kung and Jefferson.
Later that day as I was driving past
my silver cliffs I stopped to pick him some grass,
and thought, if he could wait, I'd get him radishes
or daisies, when they come. Dead poets like him
are all for flowers, they still like to sniff
and stare in the air—vaguely—like sensitive horses,
their eyes filled up with grief and yearning.
If I had the casket before me I would put
a sunflower in the paw—he wouldn't mind—
as if he were lying there waiting to jump up,
waiting to shout, "It's me, it's me, I live
for beauty, I live for justice," and then sink back
on the satin pillow, his hair falling over the edges,
the crimson gone from his face, the yellow back.
Dear poets of Perigord, dear poets of New York,
I stopped at a small park on the way back
to think about the centaurs and the white oxen.
I thought we'd share the light between us, I thought
we'd talk about Flaubert and his contempt
for *la bêtise moderne*, or for that matter
we could talk about the Venice of dreams
or we could turn to American poetry
since World War II and the function of government
to dirty the water or we could just sit and rage

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at the new mushiness and the new anemia.
For silence he could stand there staring at the trees
or look at me in the face without a word,
the way he did at the end—for my own silence
I could go back to his death in 72
and what has happened to me in the last ten years
or I'd go back to 1948
and what it was like to read *Personae*, to sit
on the stone benches and read, or I'd return,
as I always do, to the hatred of Jews, to Pound's
own home-grown vicious boring *bêtise*, but mostly
I think my mind would drift away and the humming
and the breathing would just take over, a concentration
on something bright and tender, some dear memory
of southern France, the road below Carcassonne,
the smell of dust and rain. My last flower
was sticking out of the ashtray,
a piece of honeysuckle or mock orange,
and I was driving *up* the river. I ended
snorting the honeysuckle—that's what it was—
and watching the seals go by. I was thinking
of Wyndham Lewis, I think, when Pound disappeared,
and when he sang his bitter song again,
a kind of whistling on the passenger's side,
I was already looking at the orange sky
and thinking of the frog's glass throat and the green light
that gives him his wisdom, and I was thinking again—
one last time—of the steps of San Salvatore
and the towers floating in the water—1982,
city of Easton, the iron railroad bridges,
the old stone houses, the first American flag,
age of the Reagans, horrible and disastrous.

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Mark Rudman

Solitaire

1

It's a little later. And very dark and quiet now.
A few scattered lights penetrate the empty distance.

City emptiness terrifies—even without the stars.
I mean—the blankness—and silence—have force: gravity.

"Cold conditions," a fire in the abandoned warehouse.
Abandoned quarries: cold smoke flows out of chiselled rocks
like fog.

I flail out mercilessly, pierced by compassion,
bound, unbounded, a raw nerve, flayed by desire, eaten
alive.

And driven: pounding my head through the wall.
Blood throb. And to end again in unknowing.

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2

I don't even know my own name, thrown overboard with the lost.
What's wrong with a good lie. Provided it's the truth.

I have tried the herbal remedies of the Etruscans.
And they work. (For a while.)

All is distilled in the temporal realm.
Yet there are dangers in wisdom preceding experience.

And wisdom in patience, even if it doesn't make you wise.
The one constant: a deep sense of unease.

No rest. Only the thought of rest. A thought—I think—grasped,
taking flight from an orange crate with the Hudson.

3

I may be most alive when I feel truly, absolutely worthless.
Stricken with an illness that is nothing less than life.

If we proceed by contraries we keep pace with the waves,
breaking on the way in, whispering on the way out.

Nothing without something to spring unpredictably—
whitecaps, heat lightning, flint-fire, avalanches . . .

Some semblance of hell is needed to remind me of what is:
sounds of lost souls risen in rubber bodies.

Up all night at the Blackjack table in Las Vegas.
Or was it Reno? I only remember—I stopped in time.

And so no matter how bad, is is better than not.
And long for summer having nothing else to long for.

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4

Once the time goes, it's gone.
And no wisdom can retrieve it.

Grave thoughts bear the mind down.
And the body has no choice but to follow.

It comes down to yes or no, and pain's in back
of every choice that turns to act.

What I find in the night, other than darkness.
In the darkness, other than light.

Solace. What a lovely word.
Solstice. What a lovely word.

5

Cement doesn't count. It doesn't even
remember. It can't even tie its shoe.

Mannequin in gray-blue light. No illusion.
No mere overcoat tossed on a hatrack.

That we see but cannot hear the hammering below.
These are priorities.

Shouts out of nowhere surrounded by elemental
harmonies. Carburetors and exhausts.

Yesterday was centuries ago. Today is all
I know will never go away.

Today when the light slides,
divides and reunites.

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Tricks

Joy Williams

Liberty had never cared for Halloween. The night gave the false hope that when one was summoned to the door by a stranger's knock, one's most horrible fears could be realized by the appearance of ghosts, bats, ambulatory corpses, and the headless hounds of hell.

On a small key off the coast of Florida, Liberty guided three children, Teddy, Lindy, and Yvonne, through the streets to a small darkened shopping center where Nicky, the fourth member of their party, lived with his parents in the back of the *Oh* pottery shop. Clem, Liberty's large white dog, followed in his black eye-mask. Teddy was a doctor, Lindy was a rose in a red tutu and long green stockings. Yvonne was a duck.

They passed a shop which sold sportswear. A sign in the shop window said, *Yes! We have mastectomy bathing suits*! Liberty tapped on the door of the pottery shop. Behind the shop was a kiln and a teepee. Roger and Rosie, Nicky's parents, hadn't been able to fire anything in the kiln for a

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month, ever since a pair of cockatoos had chosen to nest there. Liberty pushed the door open and saw Rosie squatting on the floor on her heels. Rosie's eyes were bulging, her tongue hung out and the tendons of her neck were prominent. When she saw the children, she relaxed her face, unwound herself erect and came bounding toward them. She reminded Liberty of a particularly mindless Irish setter.

"Oh," she said. "I feel wonderful! Vivid! But I feel relaxed too."

"What's that?" Lindy asked. She touched a pin on Rosie's blouse. There was a man's picture on the pin.

"Oh," Rosie said, "that's the Dalai Lama. I met the Dalai Lama. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and a little button on his suit just like this one that showed a picture of himself, the Dalai Lama. When I met him I felt his spirit piercing me like little arrows. I felt a great yearning for nonexistence. It was great!" Rosie ran her hand through the ringlets of her rusty red hair. She smiled at the children. "I used to take drugs but then I met the Dalai Lama and he made me clean. It was great to be clean, let me tell you. Then I met Roger-Dad and that was great too. I mean, I'm very accepting now."

"Is Nicky ready?" Liberty asked. The room was filled with pots and bowls and cups and vases. There was a stove in the corner with a box of Corn Flakes on it.

"Oh," Rosie said, "yes. He's all set. He has the greatest costume but he doesn't like it. He doesn't want to come out of the teepee. Why don't you kids go and get him out of the teepee?"

The children ran outside, calling.

Rosie beamed at Liberty. "You're a Christian, right? I bet, I mean, I can imagine it."

"I believe in guilt and longing," Liberty admitted. "Confession and continual defeat. The circle and the spiral." The words filled up the room pleasantly, like boulders.

"Jesus could never have saved me from drugs. Jesus is dead." Rosie reflected sadly on this for a moment.

The children returned with Nicky. The little boy was dressed half as a man and half as a woman. Half a tie was

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sewn to half a frilly blouse, half a skirt to a single trouser leg. On one side of his face was glued a beard and a thick eyebrow. There was lipstick on one side of his mouth and a rhinestone earring dangling from his ear.

"What is he?" Yvonne demanded of Rosie.

"He is," Rosie said proudly, "a representation in human form of the principle of wholeness."

The children gaped. Lindy blew a large blue bubble and gathered it back in her mouth.

"Isn't he a sweetie!" Rosie said, hugging Nicky. "Nicky-boy and Roger-dad are both such sweet little people!" She put a highly speckled banana in each child's bag. "Have a ball!" she said to the children. The children looked at the first thing in the bottom of their bags. Before, their bags had been perfect. Now each bag had a banana in it.

The little group left the darkness of the old shopping center and entered a neighborhood Liberty knew well. There was a single star in the vast Gulf sky. Lindy held Liberty's left hand, Nicky her right. There was a long purple bruise on Lindy's arm. Lindy hurt herself often but seldom felt pain or showed any sign of alarm. Once, climbing on the kitchen cabinet to get a jar of peanut butter from the cupboard above, she fell straddle-legged on the open cupboard door below. Her vagina bled. The bottom of her Wonder-Woman bathing suit turned red. Liberty drove her to the clinic where it was necessary that she spend the night. Lindy never cried.

Nicky's hand, the hand which held Liberty's, was sheathed in a lady's calfskin glove. Somewhere, out on the Gulf, rich people were eating unborn calf on a yacht. Roses grew in urns. Brass fittings gleamed.

Last Halloween, on the mainland, a motorist had discovered a decapitated, skinned, and limbless body lying in the parking lot of a Land-O-Sleep store. It was disgusting. The reporter from the newspaper had thrown up. First reports had been that it was a cult murder. Second reports had been that it was the result of a lovers' quarrel. Third reports were that it was a side of beef that had fallen out of the unlocked

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door of a meat truck. The story faded away. People went back to their usual concerns of keeping their staghorns moist and their portfolios diversified.

"My parents went to a party last night," Nicky said, "and they told me that there was a coffin in the house and it was filled with Big Macs."

The evening was warm. One could hear the Gulf waters sucking at the beach. Cars crept by transporting small, ghastly beings. Liberty and the children first approached the house of the retired Colonel. The retired Colonel had a bazooka and a collection of thunder jugs. He had a coffee table which was an old gravemarker supported by two concrete blocks. The marker was slim and weather-pocked and had an angel etched upon it. The dates were 1797 to 1798. The retired Colonel in whose home the marker lay, covered with newspapers and filled ashtrays, was a heavy, sallow man, a widower with blackheads around his eyes. He gave each child a small lollipop, the kind which are acquired in banks.

The children ran across the ant mounds on the lawn to the next house, a house from which came the voice of Elvis Presley singing "Heartbreak Hotel." Liberty watched as the door opened, as the children giggled and jiggled on the steps. An enormous Oriental rug filled the floor of the living room and climbed one wall. Propped against it were two large blue teddy bears. Pinned to the center of the rug was an enormous blown-up photograph of The King with his curled lip, his thickly lashed eyes, his look of humorous sadism, signing the hand of a blonde, dazed girl in an angora sweater and poodle skirt. A fat woman with a cap of heavy curls, holding a bottle of Coca-Cola in one hand, stood on the little porch in front of the children. Liberty realized she was witnessing someone quite dead, someone whose moment had enveloped her years before. Clem, from the holes of his black eye-mask looked at the woman too, but his gaze was more tolerant. Clem's nervous system enabled him to see the world in a different fashion from Liberty. Everyone had a model of the world, a world which they believed in, a world which they could bear. And so it was, the truth specific to each species. To each and all,

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one's own dark wood.

The children ran across the grass.

"That woman gave us each a dime," Nicky screamed.

"We can't accept cookies," Yvonne was saying to a woman at the door of another residence. "My mother said they might be made with Sani-Flush or something. Do you have anything else?"

One of the woman's arms seemed paralyzed. She smiled at Yvonne and gently shut the door. The cookies were small and pale, dusted with colored sprinkles. Yvonne sighed and crushed the cookies in her hand. Her duck mask registered surprise and concern. It was not Donald Duck. It was a duck personality entirely different from Donald's.

They moved along, grazing the landscape as thoroughly as Mexican goats. Fifteen dwellings, twenty. The swimming pools were lit, the sprinklers cast their slow, soft arc. Thousands of dollars of lighting and millions of kilowatts of electricity were used to make green plants red and blue. Thousands of gallons of water were pumped up to make thousands of bags of pine chips dark against the pale trunks. The little group moved past beneath a curved immensity of sky, now filled with stars.

Clem had lost his eye-mask. He lingered behind the group, taking a leak here and there, sorting things out, isolating his preferences, measuring the extent of past grievances and pleasures.

A man wearing red trousers and no shoes or shirt opened the door of a small house. Cold air fled out into the muggy night. The man had thick grey hair and four nipples. A mat of grey hair grew neatly on his chest between the nipples. He feigned great horror at the sight of the children and extended a bowl full of candy bars.

"Can I use your toilet?" Lindy asked.

"Sure," the man said.

The children stared in silence at the man's chest. Lindy squeezed by him and disappeared down a corridor to the right. Lindy loved utilizing people's bathrooms and had an unerring sense of where they were.

"Can that dog do tricks?" the man asked Liberty. "I had a

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dog once that was so well trained, you'd give him a cookie, he'd get halfway through it, you'd tell him to spit it out, he would."

"He can't do that," Liberty said, looking at Clem.

"Not inclined that way, huh," the man said.

They waited for what seemed a long time for Lindy to reappear. Nicky, holding Teddy's hand, was asleep on his feet. He made little whistling sighs.

"Why don't you come in," the man finally said, "and collect your kid." He didn't seem annoyed.

The children sat on the steps and counted their candy. Liberty followed the man into the house. On a white bamboo coffee table were a dish of peanuts, two empty martini glasses and a ceramic dildo.

"That's an old one," Liberty said.

"Why yes it is," the man said, looking at the dildo with pride. "It's from Martha's Vineyard. It belonged to one of those poor whaling wives."

"Lindy," Liberty called.

"The bathroom's this way," the man said. She followed him down the corridor. The door was partially open and she saw a white towel in a ring, a mirror picturing the tiled wall of a shower, everything white as an egret's breast. The man had a thin, young neck from behind. Liberty's hands dangled at her sides. She felt as though she, somehow, were the threatening party. The sound of a television came from another room.

"Lindy," Liberty called.

"Here she is," the man said.

Lindy was sitting on a bed with a man in a striped bathrobe. The man was smoking a cigarette. The bedspread was a dark synthetic fur. They were watching a documentary on the Renaissance. The large screen on the wall showed Ghiberti's gold doors of the Baptistry in Florence.

"The creation and the expulsion from Eden," Lindy said, bouncing on the bed. "Cain and Abel. Noah and the Flood. The sacrifice of Isaac."

Lindy went to Sunday School. She knew these people. She drew them with her crayons.

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"You'd be disappointed in Florence, kid," the man on the bed said. "Too many cars. It's a filthy place."

"C'mon, honey," Liberty said. She touched Lindy's knee. The nipples on the man's chest were like eyes blazing from the pyramids on the backs of dollar bills. Thank you for not hurting her, she wanted to say. She knew it would be an improper thing to say.

"I flushed," Lindy said. She got up.

"They're going to show Michelangelo's four Captives in a moment," the man in the bathrobe said. "I've seen this program many many times." He looked at Lindy as though he realized she were a captive too, a part of her imprisoned in a stony, unworked region of her mind.

Lindy looked at the screen. "A doll," she said.

"Nah, not a doll," the man said. "You like dolls?" Lindy looked at him. The stripes of the man's bathrobe were wide and dark, the interstices white. Smoke lay in levels in the room. The man extinguished his cigarette and opened the drawer of his bedside table. Blunt, blurred features in stone filled the television screen. He put something in an envelope, licked the envelope shut and handed it to Lindy. She dropped it in her bag of candy.

At the door, the barechested man whispered, "That is the most generous, the most genuine human being you will ever meet."

Outside, the street looked peculiar to Liberty as though dipped in milk.

"One more house!" the children begged. "One more!"

A pick-up approached them. A man was driving, and there was a dog on the seat beside him. The driver noticed Clem and put one hand over his dog's eyes as they passed by.

Liberty's head ached. She felt like a pilgrim wandering earnestly across barren steppes, but without a prayer. She took a deep breath, trying to relax. She smelled pine, oranges, engine oil.

The children's breath smelled of cinnamon bears. "One more!" they cried.

"All I have left is gum," a woman at the next house said.

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"You shoulda come earlier." She appeared somewhat loaded. She was wearing a two-piece bathing suit and drinking a beer. The top of the suit did not resemble the bottom in its pattern. "Just gum, but even so, you got to do a trick before you get the treat." She smiled as though she were flirting.

Lindy suddenly stood on her head. She smelled. There was a scissoring of stockinged legs, a whiff of urine.

"That's wonderful," the woman said.

"I could tell your fortune," Teddy said.

"No thanks, honey," the woman said, "and I'll tell you why." She tapped Teddy's chest with a long, painted nail. "Doctors give me the shivers. They give me the heebie-jeebies. My first husband was a doctor. You know what he knew about? Livers. His whole world was livers. He was a little dark Iranian, always smiling. He was creepy beyond belief." She turned to Yvonne. "What are you going to do for me, ducky?"

The duck spoke without moving its beak.

> I shall know why when Time is over
> And I have ceased to wonder why
> Christ will explain each separate anguish
> In the fair schoolroom of the sky

Yvonne had a little lisp. She shook her hips and wrists to the words as though they were rock and roll lyrics. "Emily Dickinson," Yvonne said.

"That's the feyest thing I've ever heard," the woman said. "Kids are getting feyer and feyer. It's the times we live in." She gave a stick of gum to Yvonne reluctantly and looked at Nicky.

"How about some football statistics?" she said dubiously. "How about some Bandits info?" The woman was still cheerful. She could take a little joke. "I've got an idea," she said to Nicky. "You tell me the very worst thing that ever happened to you."

Nicky looked at the woman, then at Liberty. He put his thumb in his mouth.

"O.K.," the woman said, rolling the beer can across her

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midriff, "I will tell you the worst thing that happened to *me*. I was just a little kid like you and I was at the circus. I was having such a wonderful time at the circus. The thing I liked best were the aerialists. I loved seeing them up so high, flying through the air, the sequins on their costumes flashing. I wanted to be an aerialist. Well, I was at the circus and a man on a trapeze missed the net and fell into the audience. He fell on me and broke my collarbone. He smelled terrible. I mean, really terrible, like a big mouse or something."

The woman chuckled, depressed. She could still bleach her hair and meet a man in a bar, maybe even manage a little water-skiing, but the night was old. Before her lay increasingly untrustworthy memories, hangovers, and pain during intercourse. Innuendoes were being made. Diagnoses were being written. A tooth had cracked the last time she ate barbeque. Someone had recently broken into her house and taken nothing. Not a goddamn thing. What had they been looking for? It was amusing that they hadn't taken anything but it was also depressing. She shut the door and turned out the light.

Liberty checked each bag to make sure there were no razor blades, tacks, pills or LSD tattoos.

"I'm the only one who got an envelope," Lindy said. She brought it out and squeezed it. Her thumb left a print.

Inside was a fifty dollar bill.

Lindy looked at it as disinterestedly as Clem. The bill was crisp and thin without a bit of history to it.

"You can buy something you'd like with this," Liberty said. "Lots of things. What would you like?"

Lindy didn't see the connection. She held the bill in her fingers. She kissed it.

"You hold onto it," Liberty said. "Don't lose it."

But Lindy didn't hold onto it. She gave it to her mother who tithed it to her church. The church gave it to a charitable organization. The charitable organization funneled it into a drug rehabilitation and suicide prevention clinic. It was taken

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from the clinic's account to purchase a toaster oven for the office staff. The owner of the appliance store where the toaster oven was purchased blew it at the track one muggy matinee on a dog named Bat Mister. The bill then commenced a round of payment for sex, liquor, biopsy results, and carburetor repair. It suffered a life that the most lurid of imaginations could not conjure. It moved in channels intense, profane, and boring. It traveled and was suckered more than once. It knew bright lights and dark pockets. It knew a turtle steak dinner for an actress in Key West. It knew a single admission to a pornographic film in which the flabbergasting size of the martyred priest's member was due to his strangulation at the moment of ejaculation. It bought Christmas trees, strawberry daiquiris, and a down-payment for a trip never realized. It went off like an orphan, wailing. The flashy coincidences it disclosed were made routine by repetition. It never looked life straight in the eye. Not once. And it never returned. And neither did the rose nor the duck nor the principle of wholeness. Not ever.

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Portfolio

New Vim!

Kenny Scharf

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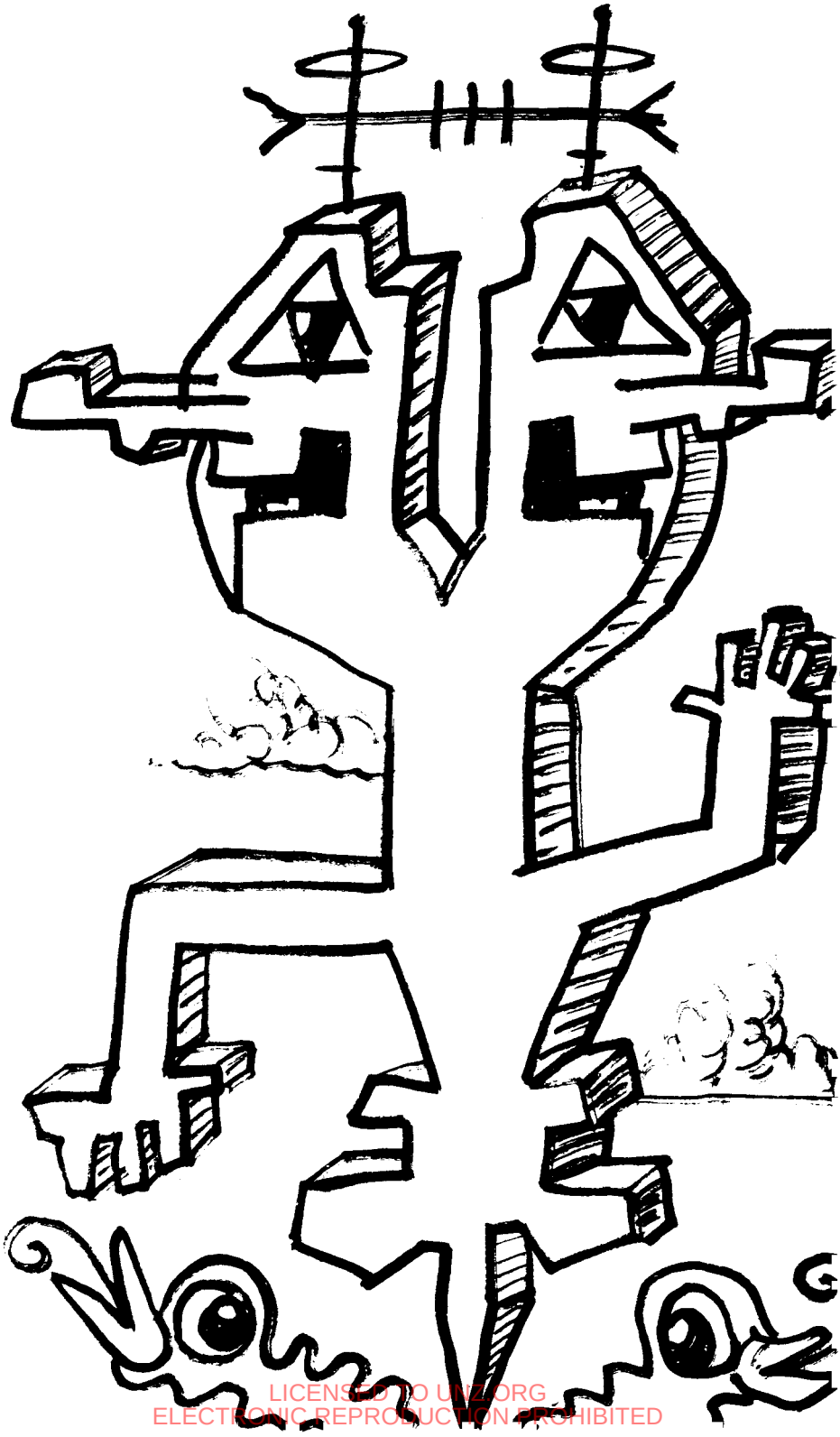

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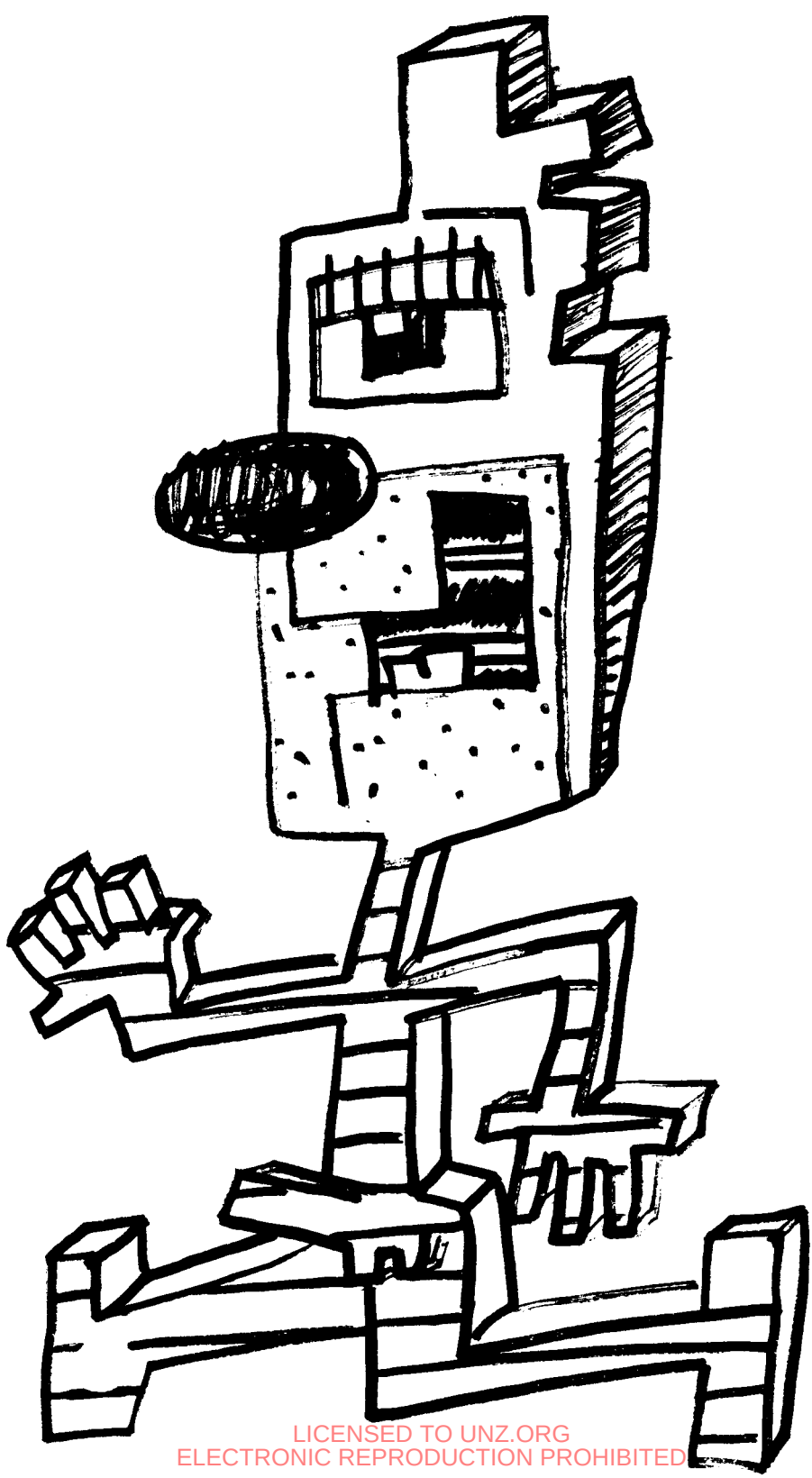

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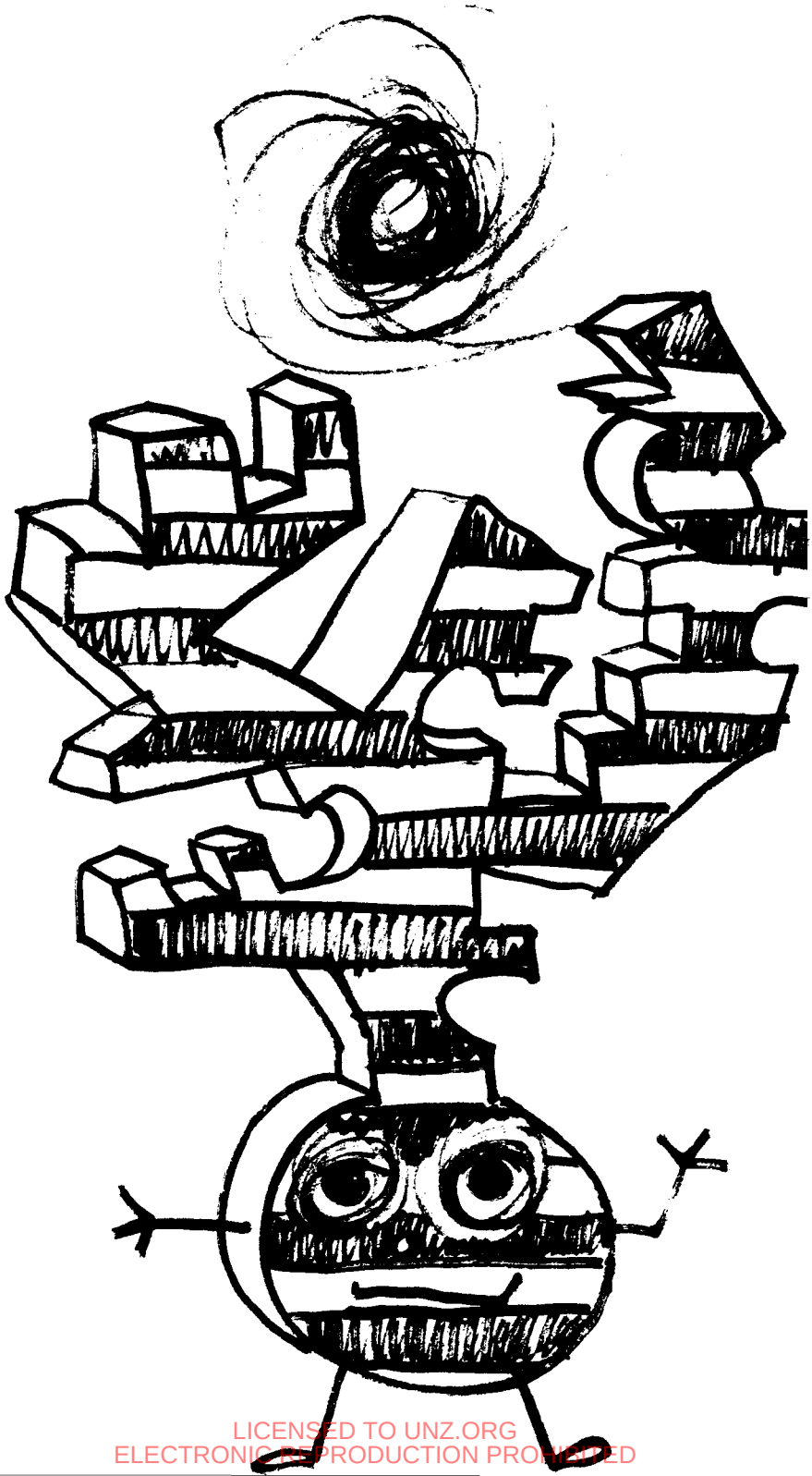

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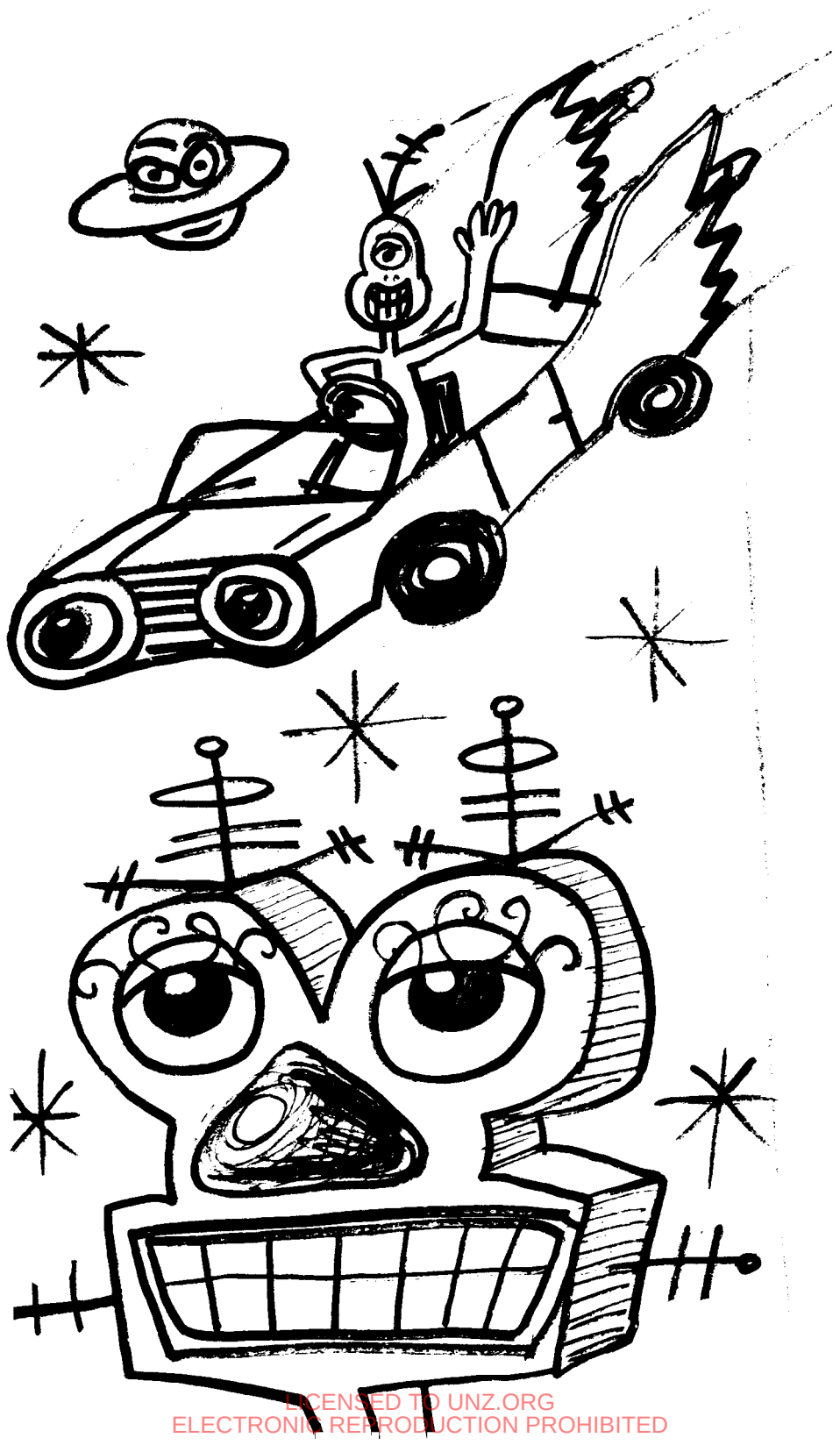

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Three Poems by Charles Wright

California Dreaming

We are not born yet, and everything's crystal under our feet.
We are not brethren, we are not underlings.
We are another nation,
living by voices that you will never hear,
Caught in the net of splendor
of time-to-come on the earth.
We shine in our distant chambers, we are golden.

Midmorning, and Darvon dustfall off the Pacific
Stuns us to ecstasy,
October sun
Stuck like a tack on the eastern drift of the sky,
The idea of God on the other,
body by body
Rinsed in the Sunday prayer-light, draining away
Into the undercoating and slow sparks of the west,
which is our solitude and our joy.

I've looked at this ridge of lights for six years now
and still don't like it,

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Strung out like Good Friday along a cliff
That Easters down to the ocean,
A dark wing with ruffled feathers as far out as Catalina
Fallen from some sky,
ruffled and laid back by the wind,
Santa Ana that lisps its hot breath
on the neck of everything.

What if the soul indeed is outside the body,
a little rainfall of light
Moistening our every step, prismatic, apotheosizic?
What if inside the body another shape is waiting to come out,
White as a quilt, loose as a fever,
and sways in the easy tides there?
What other anagoge in this life but the self?
What other ladder to Paradise
but the smooth hand holds of the rib cage?
High in the palm tree the orioles twitter and grieve.
We twitter and grieve, the spider twirls the honey bee,
Who twitters and grieves, around in her net,
then draws it by one leg
Up to the fish bone fern leaves inside the pepper tree
swaddled in silk
And turns it again and again until it is shining.

Some nights, when the rock-and-roll band next door has quit playing,
And the last helicopter has thwonked back to the Marine base,
And the dark lets all its weight down
to within a half inch of the ground,

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I sit outside in the gold lamé of the moon
as the town sleeps and the country sleeps
Like flung confetti around me,
And wonder just what in the hell I'm doing out here
So many thousands of miles away from what I know best.
And what I know best
has nothing to do with Point
Conception
And Avalon and the long erasure of ocean
Out there where the landscape ends.
What I know best is a little thing.
It sits on the far side of the simile,
the like that's like the like.

Today is sweet stuff on the tongue.
The question of how we should live our lives in this world
Will find no answer from us
this morning,
Sunflick, the ocean humping its back
Beneath us, shivering out
wave after wave we fall from
And cut through in a white scar of healed waters,
Our wet suits glossed slick as seals,
our boards grown sharp as cries.
We rise and fall like the sun.

Ghost of the Muse and her dogsbody
Suspended above the beach, November 25,
Sun like a Valium disc, smog like rust in the trees.
White-hooded and friar-backed,
a gull choir eyeballs the wave reach.
Invisibly pistoned, the sea keeps it up,
plunges and draws back, plunges and
draws back,

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Yesterday hung like a porcelain cup behind the eyes,
Sonorous valves, insistent extremities,
the worm creeping out of the heart . . .

Who are these people we pretend to be,
untouched by the setting sun?
They stand less stiffly than we do, and handsomer,
First on the left foot, and then the right.
Just for a moment we see ourselves inside them,
peering out,
And then they go their own way and we go ours,
Back to the window seat above the driveway,
Christmas lights in the pepper tree,
black Madonna
Gazing out from the alicanthus.
Chalk eyes downcast, heavy with weeping and bitterness,
Her time has come round again.

Piece by small piece the world falls away from us like spores
From a milkweed pod,
and everything we have known,
And everyone we have known,
Is taken away by the wind to forgetfulness,
Somebody always humming,
California dreaming . . .

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Roma I

To start with, it looked abstract
that first year from the balcony
Over the Via del Babuino,
Local color as far as the eye could see,
and mumbled in slaps and clumps
Of gouaches constantly to itself,
A gentian snood of twilight in winter,
blood orange in spring,
And ten thousand yards of glass in the summer sky.
Wherever you looked in October, the night was jigged.

(In front of the Ristorante Bolognese,
Monica Vitti and Michelangelo Antonioni are having an apéritif,
Watched by a hundred people.
On the marble plaque
On the building across the street from my room to the Polish patriot
Whose name escapes me forever,
The words start to disappear in the April nightswell.
The river of cars turns its small lights on,
and everyone keeps on looking at everyone else.)

Rome in Rome? We're all leading afterlives
of one sort or another,
Wrapped in bird feathers, pecking away at our gathered seed,
The form inside the form inside.
And nothing's more common by now than the obelisk
At one end of the street
and the stone boat at the other . . .
The smell of a dozen dinners is borne up
On exhaust fumes,
timeless, somehow, and vaguely
reassuring.

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Roma II

I looked long and long at my mother's miniature
The next year,
the year I lived on the east side
Of the church building that overlooked the Campo dei Fiori.
Her body had entered the oak grove.
By the river of five-sided leaves she had laid it down,
Hummingbird hard at the yellow shells of the sour grass,
Red throat in the light vouchsafed,
then quick hum to a marigold.

The poem is a self-portrait
always, no matter what mask
You take off and put back on.
As this one is, color of cream and a mouthful of air.
Rome is like that, and we are,
taken off and put back on.
Downstairs, in front of the *Pollarolla*,
The Irish poets are sketching themselves in,
and the blue awnings, and motorbikes.
They draw till we're all in, even our hands.

Surely, as has been said, emptiness is the beginning of all things.
Thus wind over water,
thus tide-pull and sand-sheen
When the sea turns its lips back . . .
Still, we stand by the tree whose limbs branch out like bones,
Or steps in the bronchial sediment.
And the masters stand in their azure gowns,
Sticks in their hands, palm leaves like birds above their heads.

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George Bradley

Caskets in the Fayoum

Everybody has a point of view,
a public expression when
all is said and done,
and each man is his own achievement,
even in, if only in,
the bland face of death.
Here, at this remote oasis where
a desert stretches away
to eternity,
tourists don't often tour, their flashbulbs
unable to shed much light
on caves and caskets
where the dead lay down with their beliefs
to be made a spectacle,
made the spectators.
Wide-eyed and incredulous, each one
looks oddly startled by death,
surprised in the act,
and each portrait, fixed in encaustic,
preserves a final instant
when the hot wax cooled.
Yannis (these faces have lost their names,
but I return them, harmless
words of convenience)
peers placidly out of his dim past
into our dark forever;
notice the slight smile:
he was happy perhaps and died young.

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Thea, though, had had enough;
bejeweled and be-chinned,
she knew how other people saw her
and couldn't care; she finds us
as unattractive
in our day as our kind were in hers.
We give others our regards:
Manos, with one eye,
though it's wide and wondrous all the same—
Maria, who's just a child
and is close to tears—
Julian, prematurely decayed,
with both hair and skin gone gray—
and Loukis, who looks
quite the scholar on the face of it:
his gaze is faintly pompous,
and faint heiroglyphs
attend him obscurely at each side.
So many new faces for
the same old story!
Looking, we think of them as touching,
or as vain, or as beside
the point, depending
on our views; but then we return to
sunshine, blind and blinking, as
they, of course, cannot.
They lived in a time and place where death
was already an art-form,
an old observance,
and died for what they could not foresee—
us, the future—things that have
come to light at last.

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Two Poems by Barry Spacks

The Gift

Particular essence . . . taken pain . . .
The gift,
And the unwrapping.

Defining It

It's vast and heavy, like banyan branches
Bending to enter the earth again:
Becoming new roots unto themselves.

It's the way over certain fields clouds gather
Every August exactly the same:
Signs of the rain's long heritage.

It's like water that gleams at the verge of the fall,
Each instant's rush
Gemstone.

It's a cup,
Lip-full
In the stream.

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All Terminations Begin in the Mind

James Fetler

1/Feb 18, 1974–Feb 25, 1974

Monday. Stuck to my promise and hauled the boat over the summit yesterday in spite of the hammering in my head. Laura did well with the tiller until we got snagged in the kelp and the whitecaps appeared. The gusts and the tide pushed us steadily into the reefs. Made Alex crouch down in the cockpit and managed to slide through the kelp with the centerboard up.

We tied up for a while at the end of the Santa Cruz pier and roamed about on the Boardwalk in our wet sneakers, the booths clattering in the wind. Alex was sullen because the Skee-Ball concession was closed. I kept seeing Constanza everywhere.

The gusts gradually subsided and Laura brought us back into the harbor on a single clean tack which eluded the worst of the swells. After we got the boat back on the trailer Alex asked if we could hike down the tracks to Capitola again. I said no.

As we were heading back over the summit Laura's mood quickly changed. She complained I was weaving, and why did I have to bring rum on the boat, and she'd appreciate it if somebody uttered an occasional word, my silence was getting everyone tense, etc. I told her to kindly restrain herself, she was getting on my nerves. She gave me a laugh and said oh boy, Constanza has done it again, hasn't she? I threw her a look. She stared out the window the rest of the way.

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The hammering got worse when we reached Palo Alto. Alex helped me unhitch the trailer and quietly withdrew. I had a cup of coffee with Claire and observed that the children are acting distant again, they don't want to connect anymore. She said what do you know about that—has your girlfriend run off with her dog? I drove to the apartment and swam forty laps in the pool.

I was finishing dinner when Constanza finally decided to call. She sounded defensive, and the jabs about my emotional miserliness were rehearsed. I didn't ask where she was hiding herself this time. She said Joe, you'd better get your head straight—your staggering into my cottage after falling out of that tree was just a little bit more than I'm willing to take. I said it wasn't exactly my fault that the branch broke on me. I could hear Waldo whimpering and the sound of foghorns. She was probably in San Francisco again. We ran out of words. She said she wasn't feeling very well and hung up. Uneasy twisting all night.

Thursday. Colder. Got myself up at 5:30 A.M. and drove past her cottage. Still empty. Sparrow said I looked awful and explained during lunch how I could stabilize my life. I said I wasn't sure where she was hiding herself and the dog, but it sounded like San Francisco. He said Joey, you're scrambling your psychic field flow—you owe it to yourself to forget about these women, all of them, and especially Constanza, they are all obvious disasters for you; I keep telling you to plug yourself into my Thursday night group energy, get in touch with your inner-space needs. He rummaged about in his box and dug out the brochure: self-hypnosis with biofeedback and the Tai Chi Chuan. I said Sparrow, please leave me alone. He said Joe, your main problem is simple: the more you abuse people, the harder you hang on to them. I got up to leave. He said listen, I've watched you for seventeen years, two divorces, a daughter and son, crazy ladies who play games with you—you can take, but you've never learned how to let go, better come to the session tonight. I promised I'd certainly try hard to make it tonight and escaped. I thought about Constanza waltzing up Telegraph Hill with the terrier on his

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fifteen-foot leash and decided to skip the finance committee staff session. That fifteen-foot leash says it all about her.

Saturday. When I drove past the cottage around midnight she was there in the bedroom, unpacking, her face almost yellow, the circles under her eyes even worse than before. Waldo was shivering on the bed. He had made himself sick nosing vermin in one of the alleys off Grant Avenue.

I helped her unpack, and then she brought out the rum. She kept fingering the scar on her cheek and went into the old monologue about my trying to stash away chunks of the past for some private future use, which accounts for my continuous distance and emotional duplicity, etc. I said Constanza, I've never met a person yet who doesn't have some kind of past, even Sparrow has a past, and what about all those phone calls from poor old Patrick in the middle of the night? She said Joseph, your past seems to stick to your skin—everywhere you go you leave fingerprints and tracks, and it was really degrading the way you dragged yourself back to my cottage with your shirt practically torn in half and the blood on your hand, what's the matter with you, scrambling up trees in the dark to check up on a woman who kept you hungry and anxious for over three years. I said the branch broke on me and I'm tired of this, so let's just let it go for a while. She said please take the dog for a walk.

I took Waldo out on his fifteen-foot leash. The tree incident started pressing on me. I kept seeing Julie's face, the way she stared out the window at me just before the branch broke. When I returned Constanza informed me she had picked up a new yeast infection. I said fine. Waldo kept snaffling all night.

Monday. To Sausalito yesterday for Laura's birthday dinner. She's fifteen today. When I asked her what she wanted for her birthday she requested I stop smoking and lighten up on the juice. I didn't think Constanza would come after all the invisible dueling between the two of them, but she popped up at the apartment just as we were leaving with

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some flowers and a gift, so I had to invite her along. She was overflowing with tender recollections and kept hugging dear Laura, who grew more and more tense. Constanza said Joseph, there's been so much closeness between all of us, even little Alex, I wish you had brought him along, so much misunderstanding and pain, especially those bittersweet weekends when we'd all be jammed together in that little bungalow in Capitola. Laura said since when have you been fond of Alex? Constanza ignored that and gave her the turquoise ring she had gotten from Patrick just before they had split—she said it had meaning for her that went way beyond words.

The dinner went fine at first—except that Constanza started objecting to the scampi being cemented to the shell, and the band struck her as just a lot of fraudulent noise, an overkill of Chicano brass and some African cowbells and reeds. I asked Laura to dance. She shook her head. I asked Constanza. She said the infection was bothering her and turned to scrutinize the glittery crowd at the bar—she characterized them as turkeys from nowhere who've just discovered platform shoes.

We edged into silence. When Laura went off to the ladies' room Constanza informed me that I'm still trying to alleviate my guilt feelings about the divorce by bowing and scraping to her—she said your fawning is really deplorable. I asked what did I do. She said Joseph, the trouble with you is you don't even know what you do—you've been jumping through so many hoops for your wives and your kids you'll be sprouting a tail pretty soon. I reminded her of the terrier that Patrick had supposedly sent to obedience school: five years old, he still dribbles his load on the rug and gets wiped with a cloth. I said Christ, look at you: you subsist on food stamps and unemployment checks and keep ruining the dog's stomach with cans of smoked oysters. She gave me her Big Trouble smile. Drove back to the Peninsula with the radio on, not a word.

Tuesday. A rambling phone call from Constanza in the

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middle of the night. She said my withdrawals have become so reflexive I'm not even aware when I'm pulling away. I said what are you talking about. She said Joseph, how many lives have you tarnished because you need to reduce your whole world to a handful of characters you can control? Laura is on her guard against you, Alex fades out of sight, and you don't even have the decency to store the sailboat in your carport: after all these years and all your shabby betrayals, you're still using Claire's garage, as though part of you has to continue on Hopkins Street, leaving its mark.

I said listen, Claire has never complained about the boat staying in the garage, and it's certainly better than letting it bleach in the sun. She said right, that's a perfect example of how you manipulate women and make them feel glad for the bonds. I thanked her for the insights and left the phone off the hook.

2/Feb 26, 1974–April 2, 1974

Monday. Overcast. She appears and I push her away, she withdraws and I want to find some way of punishing her. She informs me she's thinking of driving to Portland to minister to Patrick, he's been getting his astral projections again. I tell her to go.

Phoned Laura last night. I asked her to kindly explain what's been gnawing at her. She said Dad, the mist around you is so thick I can hardly get through any more—the only time you emerge is when Constanza shows up with her cameras and that neurotic terrier, and then you block out everything else, I don't even exist, and as soon as she leaves you go back to the mist. I said what's bugging Alex. She said Alex is getting more and more jumpy around you—all you give him these days are little grunts and commands, pretty soon he'll be actually hiding from you.

Thursday. Four hours sleep after two quarts of Coors and an unhappy twisting around in her bed. She announces to

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me at 4:30 A.M. that I'm trapped by my compulsive acquisitiveness—I never relinquish anything, people have to be pried away from me. I said look at the clock, can't it wait? She said Joe, you were whimpering something about Julie again in your sleep. I said look, I'm not responsible for what I say in my sleep, and I simply can't figure you out: for months you were badgering me to let you move in, so you finally moved in that whole miserable year in Capitola, and you turned sullen and swore I was smothering you, I was making it harder and harder to breathe, so then I forced you to pack up and leave and you got even worse, what in hell do you want! She said all right, get out of here, Joe, I'm so tired of this! I rolled over and went back to sleep.

Tuesday. Sparrow is touchy again because I didn't drive down to his inner-space retreat at Pajaro Dunes. He mentioned that Adam Glockman had led a high-powered workshop on guilt. I said I'm sorry I missed that. He said no, you're not—you've never learned how to reach out: you've lived in all kinds of places with lovers and wives, but when you pull up your stakes it doesn't matter at all because you weren't really there, you just stand on the sidelines with your hands in your pockets and watch, there has never been a place that's been special to you.

Constanza showed up at my door very late with her attaché case and the dark circles under her eyes. She departed a few minutes ago, leaving me raw. She said boy, what a lover you've turned out to be. I said sweetheart, I'm not a machine. Even with the electrical prods I could feel the wind pushing us farther apart.

Wednesday. Very low tide at Redwood City. Got caught in the mud near the mouth of the channel, the rudder fittings almost twisting off. A sudden strong puff: the boat eased over on its side, our oranges floating away. Waldo was scrambling frantically—he kept trying to dig his nails into the hull. Constanza yelled save him, you idiot, you know he can't swim!

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I climbed up on the centerboard and got the boat righted. As I was trying to get him back into the cockpit Waldo snapped at my wrist. I cuffed the side of his nose. Constanza went into a rage: you son of a bitch, Joe, you exploit human beings, you're brutal to dumb animals! I told her to shut up, I was trying to get the boat moving again, but she kept pounding my chest with her fist, her face getting greenish, then practically white. I hauled in on the mainsheet as hard as I could, and the boat flipped us into the channel again. She didn't pound me the second time around.

Thursday. Rain. Spent an hour listening to Sparrow declaiming on creative procrastination in transpersonal relationships. I didn't get the connections he was trying to make. He said Joey, you didn't try.

Constanza insisted I get a tetanus shot for the bite. Now when I drive over to her cottage I sense ominous birds in the trees. She curls herself up in the big basket chair with her hash, the rum at her elbow and the dog in her lap. She keeps trying out her claws. She was using her claws when we shared the same roof, she is using her claws as we're drifting apart.

Friday. Sparrow was unable to restrain himself at the finance committee staff session this morning: motions and recommendations and qualifications and viable alternatives. I suggested during lunch that one circle of the Inferno be set aside for the finance committee freaks. Sparrow threw his fork down so hard that it bounced out of his plate. He said Joey, the only time I've seen you thaw out and be truly authentic is right after some woman has booted you out of her life—that's when you start rolling your eyes—but as soon as things stabilize you go back to the ice in your head. I said hey, am I really as bad as all that? He said worse.

Monday. Constanza appeared at my door around ten with her attaché case and the dog. After the third rum & coke she was going nonstop like a disc jockey, her face changing colors again. I kept wondering how I could turn off the switch. She

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repeated her theory that I had willfully crippled myself because I couldn't get Julie to totally surrender to me—that's why I've become a lost cause in the sack. She was still crackling away at 2:30 A.M.

Awoke surly and raw. Drove to work, left instructions on the blackboard and crept to the faculty lounge. I was half-dozing on the cot in the side room when Sparrow discovered me and told me to get the hell out of the place, the palace guard would be coming down for coffee pretty soon and I was going to cut my own throat.

Wednesday. Phoned Constanza to see if she had any rum. It was past midnight and she didn't want me to come. I drove over. She said look at your face, Jesus Christ, this is like Capitola all over again! I said do you remember how you kept complaining until I agreed you could move in with me, and then the complaints got much worse, and you couldn't even shoot any film, and you said I was digging a trench around you? She said I had very good reasons to complain and you know what they are—living with you, Joe, is like trying to pump up a tire full of holes.

Sparrow took me aside today and informed me he's going to lease a defunct Bible camp near Lake Tahoe and live on the grounds with his family and some friends and transform the place into a center for inner-space probes. He's asking a select few to invest their money and positive energy. I said Sparrow, I'm broke. He patted my shoulder and said well, I guess you are starting to pay for your sins.

Tuesday. Watched impeachment-maneuvering on the TV in the faculty lounge. Sparrow insists the impeachment was all orchestrated a long time ago. I said well, maybe so, but the steps are absorbing to watch anyway—Nixon looks like a character in a ballet executing a slow and meticulous dance to the edge of the cliff. Sparrow said Joey, that's so typical of you: you're obsessed with the way things conclude and decay.

Constanza asked if she could borrow my MasterCharge card—Patrick writes he's discovering needs in himself only

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she can fulfill, so she may have to drive up and get him back on his feet. I said have a good time and threw the card in her lap. She said thanks. From the very beginning, I predicted it'd turn out like this.

3/Apr 3, 1974–Apr 21, 1974

Wednesday. Constanza is mentally packing her bags. I lie next to her as she fingers the scar on her cheek and we hear the clock ticking. She said she was digging through some of the letters I had sent her last year, and except for the quotations from Rilke and Proust they sounded like some evangelist's admonitions to his dutiful wife. More hammering over the eyes from her terrible rum. This morning I leaned into the urinal that ricochets and walked up to the lectern to introduce John Stuart Mill with a couple of stains on the front of my pants.

Sunday. Sparrow explained to me that I never learned how to express my psychic flow—he said you keep trying to dam up currents inside you that can't be contained. I said what do you want me to do? He said go with the flow. Dinner with Constanza. Her cousin had left some more of his deplorable hash. We were in bed before 11. In the middle of the night her phone jangles in my ear. She takes the phone into the bathroom. I stumble back into sleep.

Thursday. Constanza dug her nails into my shoulder and cried half the night. She said Joe, you equate love with slashing and pulling away. I said no, that's not true. She rammed her fist into the pillow and said I don't think you feel normal unless things are falling apart.

Sunday. Drove over to her cottage last night and almost turned around and came home. The purple chopper was parked out in front. I drove around the block a couple of times and then parked and went in. Constanza's cousin was

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clomping around in his boots making masculine utterances and popping beer cans. His latest girlfriend had just kicked him out and he needed a place where he could crash for a while. She was feeding the turtles brine shrimp and watering the plants and studiously ignored me. The cats came and went. Waldo kept yawning and scratching himself. The kitchen got cluttered with wisecracks and flattened beer cans. He said he was working on a big Mexican deal—this could be really big. I asked him how big. He said awfully big. I left them smoking their hash on the front porch and drove back to the apartment. They were discussing the price of the hash. It was pretty good hash for a couple of indigents living at public expense.

Monday. Constanza complains she hasn't got enough strength of character to shake herself free, and she knows she can't keep sliding along like this, I am driving her into the ground with my long silences. I said what silences? She said Joseph, you don't even know when you pull yourself into your shell. I said get rid of that cousin of yours and you'll see me emerge. She said my cousin has already moved out, and that isn't the trouble at all. I said how come you're always complaining?—the great lamentations seem to come from your side. She turned her back on me. I said Constanza, if you don't feel fulfilled you can always ring up your agent and shoot a few rolls of film instead of settling for food stamps and hash every night—just don't take out your tensions on me, you don't hear me complain. She said Joe, you're too devious to come out and complain but you've got your own ways of tormenting the people around you, there's a pretty good reference list.

Saturday. Departmental cioppino repast at Mandel's Friday night. The palace guards began their usual big scrutiny the moment Constanza appeared on my arm in her long Lady Dracula dress. She was smoking her little cigars. Mandel mentioned that I'd missed an awful lot of departmental sessions this year. I said I had overextended myself, but I'd cer-

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tainly try to be there the next time. He said okay, Joe, fine—have some wine.

Towards the end of the evening Sparrow put his arms around Constanza and me and led us out to the pool area. Sparrow's wife was dancing around in the den by herself. We were all pretty far gone. Sparrow clasped us to his bosom and assured Constanza with brimming eyes that he truly empathized with the anguish he saw in her face. He said you know, I've been watching this character here for quite a few years, and I love him like nobody else, except maybe my wife and my kids, he's like part of the family to me, but he's not to be trusted, Constanza, he is lethal to people who reach out to him—he holes up in his private little bunker until they start pulling away, then he rips himself open and spatters. I twisted away. Sparrow fell in the pool. I stumbled around the side of the house and got into the car and drove home.

4/Apr 26, 1974–May 28, 1974

Friday. Constanza is jumpy. She says Patrick's presence has visited her several times recently, both inside the cottage and out in the yard. She makes her eyes large. Waldo has been whimpering and running in circles, and her car had a flat yesterday. This morning the toaster got stuck and shot sparks. I suggested she purchase some flash bulbs and get Patrick's penumbra on slides—Sparrow could use them for one of his Thursday night inner-space probes.

Tuesday. She said she wanted to see Capitola again. Took another long walk along the tracks, Constanza carrying Waldo across the trestle in her arms. The river looked very low. A few ducks. Laughter from the Shadowbrook deck.

We strolled through the village. A new natural foods restaurant. The headshop had posters of Nixon & Gang behind bars. Waldo ran along the beach. The machinery kept grinding in me. She pressed her face against my shoulder and said she felt awful about all the walls that had

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come up between everyone, she had really tried to break through the walls. I said I didn't see why there had to be walls. She leaned into me and kept shaking her head. I said look, everything'll be fine. She said don't make me laugh.

Sunday. Woke up very early this morning feeling tremors of panic: something's got to be done! Made the necessary phone calls and transported the whole crew to San Juan Bautista, a crisp day, everyone cheerful and light, Constanza shooting several rolls of film in the mission cemetery, Laura spiriting Alex into the church for some kind of contrition exercise she'd cooked up in her head.

I stretched myself out in the middle of the grassy square and let the sun flutter over me. Alex stumbled out of the church with candle drippings all over his hands.

We stopped at the bakery for palm leaves and cheese and ate lunch on the bleachers overlooking the rodeo ring. Constanza inserted her plastic Dracula fangs and lunged at our necks. Alex bit into her leg.

I took pictures of everyone, including the terrier, in the grape arbor behind the hotel. We walked over to the stables. When I lined them all up at the end of the bucket-brigade wagon, Constanza said hold it a second. She asked for the Pentax. I handed it to her. She flipped the back open, exposing the film. I grabbed the camera out of her hand. She said Joe, you're repeating your morbid rituals again! I said what are you talking about? She said go take a look at your famous collection of slides!

Saturday. Thirty-six nonstop hours of awareness exercises at Pajaro Dunes. The psychosynthesis facilitator showed up late looking drained: he'd been fighting freeway traffic all the way from Oakland. Sparrow pushed back the furniture as a skeletal woman in a flowing white gown was describing to me her accidental drowning in a pond in the winter of 1823. I asked how it happened. She said the ice broke and her cloak dragged her down—it had a lining of fur. I asked where was the pond. She said just outside Trenton, New Jersey.

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The facilitator pulled off his shirt and we started our breathing. He explained about muscular control. I lay next to the woman in white. Her toes seemed strangely bent. I lost all track of time. We were moving from breathing to inner-space probes. The facilitator was asking us to walk down a flight of ten stairs. As I walked down the steps the woman in white began twisting my thumb. The facilitator said I want you to open the door that you see before you. I opened the door and stepped into a large empty room with a window. He said I want you to study whatever you see before you. I walked over to the window and looked out. The black water was rising, and the old skiff lay anchored a few yards away. He said go. As I climbed through the window and started to wade to the skiff I could feel my thumb aching. The woman was sucking on it. I pulled my hand back and got up from the floor and went out to the dunes.

The woman followed me out. She said hey, wait for me. I said go back inside. She said you're in a very bad space, aren't you. I said please go inside. She went back to the group. I stayed out on the dunes for a couple of hours.

Wednesday. She's drifting again. Instead of checking with the agent for free-lance assignments she floats around the cottage over-feeding the turtles and drowning the plants while the terrier runs around sniffing Patrick's penumbra and squirting all over the floor. Then her cousin roars up on his bike and they light up a couple of joints and start slamming the wisecracks around. The cousin asks me to lend him a twenty, he's got an outrageous deal coming up. I inform him I don't have a twenty. He says okay, Joe, cool.

Tuesday. I was going to lay off the rum but she had a fresh pint. We watched *Civilization* and got into the hash. She kept rubbing her scar, so I knew things were happening upstairs. She was very affectionate and brought her electrical gadgets to bed. This morning she shook me awake. She said Joseph, I'm going away for a while. I said when. She said now.

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5/May 31, 1974–Jun 3, 1974

Friday. Not a word. Awoke in the middle of the night—I was sure Waldo was scratching outside. I crawled out of bed. No Waldo. Got dressed and drove over to the cottage. I tried all the windows. The windows were locked. I sat on the stone bench in the backyard until I had smoked all my cigarettes, then drove home.

Half an hour after I went back to bed the phone rang: Claire was having more problems with the washing machine. I said listen, I'm not your repairman, it's been seven long years, would you kindly get off my back, all of you! She said goodness, Constanza has done it again, hasn't she? Click.

As I'm standing in the shower: is that the phone? As I'm walking to the car: is that the phone?

Sunday. Every time I called Julie the architects claimed she was out in the field, but I drove past her office and saw her car parked in the usual slot. When I tried reaching her at home I kept getting busy signals. I had almost forgotten the barbed wire she erects.

When I told Sparrow about Constanza's flight up to Portland he said what did you expect, Joe—you knew the first week you took up with that woman it'd happen this way, you even gave me the entire scenario—and for Christ's sake leave Julie alone! I said Sparrow, I've always left Julie alone. He said Joey, you're impossible, you don't understand how relationships work: fourteen years I've been married, three sons who play soccer, a house in Los Altos I practically built by myself, including the wiring, a wife who sings Bach cantatas and goes jogging with me every morning at six—that's stability, Joe, that is growth, and that kind of stability you simply can't handle, it scares you away—at least you could have the common decency to leave your ex-wives alone, especially considering how you set them all up and then walked out on them. I said I never set anyone up, and I never walked out on anyone. Sparrow said have it your own way and left.

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To Bolinas yesterday, Laura and Alex leaping into the surf in their jeans. I watched a couple of very young girls riding bareback across the wet pebbles and shells. The fog burned off by noon and the sun struck the Tamalpais hills.

We had fruit balls and organic root beer at the Full Earth. I remembered the cook—he had worked at the North Side cantina when I was living in Berkeley with Claire and finishing graduate school. I asked Laura if she remembered the old days in Berkeley—she couldn't have been more than three. She said no.

The Full Earth waitress was hostile: too many outsiders descending upon Bolinas these days, pretty soon it'll be like Carmel. She said she had come to Bolinas from Stockton because she had heard it was rustic and quiet, but if things got much worse she was going to split up to Humboldt County or some place like that. Alex said the organic root beer tasted like ink. I kept brooding over Constanza. The hammering returned every time I remembered she still had my MasterCharge card. Laura kept glancing at me. She kept her mouth shut but seemed pleased.

Monday. If she knocked on my door in the middle of the night with the terrier in her arms I would send her away, yet I keep waiting for that knock. I want to find some way of making her sting. She had kept me off-balance for over two years with her damned petulance, always demanding what I didn't possess or what I couldn't give up, taunting me that I hadn't been able to forget everything that had happened to me. I don't know when we first started sliding apart. Months ago, when I asked her to pack up her things and clear out of the bungalow in Capitola, she said Joseph, you'd better stop looking for closeness and warmth, it does bad things to you. I said please get your things out of here. We had been sailing that day and the sails lay bunched up on the floor. She looked at the sails and the couch and the photographs tacked to the wall and said all terminations begin in the mind and walked out.

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EP? We would still like to get in the ideograms for these Chinese words if you can help us identify them. Fang says he does not recognize the quotation. Can you draw them the way you remember them so we can track them down?

don't remember

Yellow iris in that river bed

yüeh^{4,5}
ming^{2}
mo^{4,5}
hsien^{1}
p'eng^{2}

Quercus on Mt Sumeru

(can'st 'ou see with the eyes of turquoise?
heaven earth
in the center
is
juniper

The purifications
are snow, rain, artemisia,
also dew, oak and the juniper

And in thy mind beauty, O Artemis,
as of mountain lakes in the dawn,
Foam and silk are thy fingers,
Kuanon,
and the long suavity of her moving,
willow and olive reflected,
Brook-water idles,
topaz against pallor of under-leaf
The lake waves Canaletto'd
under blue paler than heaven,
the rock-layers arc'd as with a compass,
this rock is magnesia,
Cozzaglio, Dino Martinazzi made the road here (Gardasena)

no #

A page proof from Canto 110 of Ezra Pound's Drafts and Fragments. *JL's query and EP's response are in the upper left-hand corner. "Fang" is Achilles Fang (so-named because his father was the most famous Greek scholar in China), a professor emeritus in Chinese Literature and Languages at Harvard who was of great assistance to EP with the Chinese ideograms in the Cantos.*

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Ann Laughlin

JL and Gary Snyder at Kitkitdizze, Gary's home in the Sierras. About 1975.

The Art of Publishing I (Part 2)

James Laughlin

What follows is the concluding section of the interview with James Laughlin, the poet and publisher, which began in issue 89. In it, Mr. Laughlin discussed his upbringing in Pittsburgh, his years at Harvard during which he started New Directions, his summer abroad in 1933 when he stayed with Gertrude Stein, and subsequently Ezra Pound, the formative years at New Directions, his relationships with Pound, William Carlos Williams, Tennessee Williams, and Djuna Barnes, among others.

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INTERVIEWER

Let's move into some questions about your relationships with New Directions writers. What features of Pound's art do you admire?

LAUGHLIN

The metrical innovations, the collage structure of the *Cantos*, the ideogrammic method. I think he was a tremendous technician. Perhaps the greatest of the century. He will endure. His criticism is remarkable and his translations are superb.

INTERVIEWER

Pound and Williams wrote poetry that was so different in many ways. Why do you think they were such good friends during the early years?

LAUGHLIN

They became friends in college at Penn in 1902. They were kindred souls who loved literature. Later Pound helped Williams to change the nature of his poetry from bad Keats to good modern. Ezra was a very loyal person who liked Bill and was supportive. Of course, they fought a lot, but it was a real friendship. Ezra was one of the first to appreciate *Kora in Hell* when few others but Marianne Moore and Kenneth Burke understood it. And that meant a lot to Bill. Ezra was a strong rooter for *Life Along the Passaic River* and for *White Mule*.

INTERVIEWER

This despite the fact that Pound was so very condescending toward him?

LAUGHLIN

Very condescending, but Bill took it. Bill was infuriated with Ezra for doing the Rome broadcasts. Bill had two boys in the service then, and Bill told him to go to hell, but when Ezra landed in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Bill felt sorry for him and went down to see him and made peace.

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INTERVIEWER

In a recent book—*The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secret of St. Elizabeth's*—a psychiatrist named E. Fuller Torrey argued that Winfred Overholser, the Superintendent at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, had protected Pound from prosecution on treason charges. Was Pound really as sane as Torrey argues?

LAUGHLIN

Not at first. When Ezra was brought to Washington from Italy I asked my lawyer, Julien Cornell, to go talk to him. Cornell called me up and said, "Jas, I can't do much to help this man. He's out of touch with reality. He has no conception that he has done anything wrong. He can't keep his mind on track. What will we do?" We corresponded with Dorothy Pound's lawyer in England and he said, "Go for insanity," and that's what we did. A few days after I'd heard from Cornell I went down to see Pound when he was still in Gallinger Prison. He was hopelessly confused. But he was given very good care in St. Elizabeth's, where he rapidly improved. He got over a lot of his paranoia and confabulation, but elements of it remained. After a year or so he was able to work and he seemed not unhappy. I'd go down to see him and he'd be cheerful, telling stories, but he still had some strange ideas. After three years Cornell wanted to try habeas corpus to get him out on the grounds that there had never been a treason case in law where a man had been held indefinitely for insanity. But Ezra wouldn't let Dorothy, who was his guardian, sign the habeas corpus papers. He said, "I will never leave here except with flying colors and a personal apology from the President." He was not realistic. He thought he'd been right all along, that we should have been fighting the Russians, not the Germans or the Italians.

INTERVIEWER

Was Pound aware of the heat that you were taking for publishing him during those years?

LAUGHLIN

I don't think he paid any attention to it. There were some

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Jewish booksellers who wouldn't order his books, but, generally speaking, there wasn't too much stink about it.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever feel that your differences with Pound on his anti-Semitism affected your relationship with him?

LAUGHLIN

When I was in Rapallo, in 1935, there were not quite nice jokes about Sir Montagu Norman, the Governor of the Bank of England, and other Jewish bankers. I was upset. This despite the fact that I'd been raised in Pittsburgh in a very anti-Semitic atmosphere. But by 1935 I'd gotten some sophistication. I went after him on it, but all he said was, "How do you think a man whose name is Ezra could be anti-Semitic?" He wouldn't face up to it. Dr. Overholser later explained it to me. Anti-Semitism was a recognized symptom of paranoia. One should not, he said, judge Ezra on moral grounds but on medical grounds. Once Overholser, who was eminent in his field, had told me that, I accepted it. I have saved a characteristic postcard from Ezra. It was time to bring out another section of the *Cantos* and it had some rather unpleasant anti-Semitic lines in it. I wrote to Ezra to ask if I could take those out. He wrote back: "Again in *Cantos*, all institutions are judged on their merits. *Idem* religion. No one can be boosted or exempted on grounds of being a Lutheran or a Manichaean. Nor can all philosophy be degraded to a status of propaganda merely because the author has one philosophy and not another. Is the *Divina Comedia* propaganda or not? From '72 on we shall enter the realm of philosophy, George Santayana, etc. The publisher cannot expect to control the religion and philosophy of his authors. Certain evil habits of language, etc. must be weighed and probably will be found wanting. I shall not accept the specific word *anti-Semitic*. There will have to be a general formula covering Mennonites, Mohammedans, Lutherans, Calvinists. I wouldn't swear to not being anti-Calvinist but that don't mean I should weigh Protestants in one balance and Anglo-

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Cats in another. All ideas coming from the Near East are probably shit. If they turn out to be typhus in the laboratory, so is it. So is Taoism. So is probably all Chinese philosophy and religion except Confucius. I am not yet sure." I never could get anywhere with him on his anti-Semitism. At one point I censored him. In one of the *Cantos* he talks about the Rothschilds and calls them "Stinkshilds." At the time a Rothschild family member was living in New York. I thought it might be libelous to call her "Stinkshild," so I just put a black bar through the name and that survived for several printings.

INTERVIEWER

You've been working recently on a film about Pound in Italy. What can you tell me about that project?

LAUGHLIN

It's being produced by a very interesting group called the New York Center for Visual History, which hopes to get the financing for a series of ten documentary films about poets, beginning with Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson and coming up through Hart Crane, Lowell and William Carlos Williams. They started with the Pound project because they wanted a contemporary figure who stood out as a key maker of modern poetry. We began in Venice, interviewing Olga Rudge, for so many years Pound's best friend, and then we shot scenes in Venice which Ezra had written about in the *Cantos* or elsewhere. Last summer we did Provence, or rather the Dordogne, up in the northern part of Provence, where Pound and T. S. Eliot and Dorothy Pound had made a walking tour in 1919 to find old troubadour castles. We were able to follow their route because every day Dorothy had written a postcard to her mother in London. These gave us the dates and where they'd been. The postcard would say, "We found Mareuil today and it was like this. . . . Today we walked to Hautefort." We had a great time shooting those old castles. We got Yves Roquette, considered the leading speaker of traditional Provençal poetry, to read Bertrand de Born for us

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from the battlements of Hautefort. And we got another man who plays the *vielle à roux*, an ancient instrument, to sing *canzone* of Arnaut Daniel at Excideuil. It was a beautiful experience. Then we went to Italy, to Rapallo, where Pound had lived. We were lucky in being able to get permission from the present owners of his old apartment to shoot the Tigullian Bay from his terrace. We shot the little house in San Ambrogio where he lived during the war. Next we went up to Sirmione on Lake Garda, one of Pound's "sacred places," where the famous first meeting with Joyce took place. Then we shot the church of San Zeno in Verona, which Pound considered the finest piece of architecture of the Middle Ages. We also went up to his daughter Mary's castle at Tirolo di Merano. We got a wonderful interview with her. We went down to Siena, a place that he loved and shot some good things there. Then down to Rome, where I was able to recite the "*Nox mihi candida*" from "Homage to Sextus Propertius" on the Palatine Hill, but the director wouldn't let me wear a toga.

INTERVIEWER

What came to be your role in this film?

LAUGHLIN

It was doing whatever they asked me to do. Literary advice. Interviews. Commentary. Voice-overs. The film's going to have a lot of poetry in it, using the latest electronic techniques. I had to interview some people in Italian, old people who had known him, which was quite a strain since I've forgotten most of my Italian.

INTERVIEWER

Is anybody playing parts?

LAUGHLIN

No. Just interviews with people who knew him. But no one will play Pound, which is good. It would be impossible to find an actor who could play Pound.

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INTERVIEWER

With respect to Pound's aesthetic theory, did you agree with him for the most part?

LAUGHLIN

I agreed with him almost completely. I reread his literary essays for a course I gave last spring at Brown and it continually astonished me how smart he was about distinguishing between good and bad writing and what in various traditions should be preserved and followed and what shouldn't. I'm amazed at his flair for that kind of discrimination. He was perhaps the first to recognize that Yeats was a *great* poet. He spotted Joyce and he spotted Eliot.

INTERVIEWER

I want to move on to some questions about Rexroth. You said in an earlier interview that "the role of Ezra in my life was taken over by Rexroth in that he advised me what to do and put me onto things." Could you elaborate on what kinds of things he was doing?

LAUGHLIN

It's odd; Kenneth was very much like Pound temperamentally, though he detested him because he considered Pound fascist and Kenneth was an anarchist. But their wide-ranging interests in everything literary and philosophical were parallel in many ways, though certain things Rexroth emphasized more than Pound. Rexroth was a great teacher, as was Pound. Pound was one of the greatest talkers I ever knew, and Rexroth was right next to him. He'd ramble on about everything. He was very helpful to me, telling me what to read. He would lend me his books, just as Ezra had done. He took over as my teacher where Pound left off. Obviously their specialties were different, but they were both stimulating.

INTERVIEWER

Did the mentorship with Pound diminish at the beginning of World War II?

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Top: Kenneth Rexroth and his daughter Mary, San Francisco, about 1963. Photo: Selden Rodman. Below: Kenneth Rexroth with his daughters Kathryn (l) and Mary (r) in their San Francisco apartment in 1965. Photographer unknown.

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LAUGHLIN

Yes. He was in Italy and no mail got through.

INTERVIEWER

How early did Rexroth come into the picture as mentor?

LAUGHLIN

I became involved with the ski resort at Alta, Utah, about 1939, and I went down often to see Kenneth and stay with him on Potrero Hill in San Francisco during the war. We spent a lot of time together, camping and skiing in the mountains, in the Sierras. We went on trips in the early spring when there was still a lot of snow. We climbed into the mountains, and Kenneth would dig a little cave in the snow, lining it with fir branches, where we slept. This was very fine. When I was staying with him in San Francisco we often went rock climbing down the coast. Rexroth was a good rock climber, very much the outdoorsman. He loved nature and understood it in a philosophical way. That shows in his greatest poems, such as "The Signature of All Things." I miss him. He was a unique character. He was cantankerous; he loved nothing better than going to read at a college and being the "insulting author." He was a naughty fellow. I used to get angry with him about that. I said, "Kenneth, you know you're hurting the sale of your books by antagonizing professors." He just laughed.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned earlier that one of your other special relationships was with Thomas Merton. What made you feel so close to him?

LAUGHLIN

He was so nice, so jolly. He wasn't a dour monk at all. He was a kind friend and interested in everything. I often went down to visit him at the monastery in Kentucky. The Abbot would give him a day off, and I'd rent a car. Tom would get an old bishop's suit out of the storeroom and start out in that.

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Then we would stop in the woods and he'd change into his farmworker's blue jeans and a beret to hide his tonsure. Then we'd hit the bars across Kentucky. He loved his beer, and he loved that smoked ham they have down there. He was a wonderful person. He wanted to read contemporary writers, but the books were often confiscated, so we had a secret system. I sent the books he wanted to the monastery psychiatrist in Louisville, who would get them to Merton. I sent him everyone he wanted to read: Sartre and Camus, Rexroth and Pound, Henry Miller and many more. We talked a great deal about the Oriental religions. He was very ecumenical. We talked about his situation and why he stuck it out in the monastery. Once I asked, "Tom, why do you stay here? You could get out and be a tremendous success in the world." He answered that the monastery was where God wanted him to be.

INTERVIEWER

Did you feel he was misplaced in a monastery?

LAUGHLIN

He would have been misplaced if he hadn't been so determined to get what he wanted in the monastery—his own hermitage among the hills. He couldn't stand the "social life" in the monastery with all the monks talking sign language, having to go to church six times a day, going to chapter, and making cheese. He finally did persuade the Abbot to build him a hermitage. Tom was a shrewd operator. He got out of sleeping in the communal dormitory by learning how to snore so loudly that the other monks got together at chapter and said, "Father Louis has got to leave the dormitory." So Tom was allowed to use one of the old bishop's rooms. He believed that the old monastic tradition was so strict that it could no longer foster true spirituality.

INTERVIEWER

Robert Lowell has complained that Merton's poetry is soft; yet you have made a case for Merton as one of the underrated poets, especially in terms of the personal epic. Could you

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elaborate?

LAUGHLIN

He wrote only one personal epic, *The Geography of Lograire*, which he started about four years before his death. What he wanted to do was obviously modeled on Williams's *Paterson*, but he executed it very much in his own way. This was going to be the geography of a man's mind and interests based on his reading. He read widely in many fields. Unfortunately, he completed only one volume of *Lograire*. I was disappointed because it only got two serious reviews. I think it will some day be recognized as one of the big modern poems. What is particularly strong in it, apart from his continually imaginative treatment of his material, is his use of parody and myth, with which he does fantastic things.

INTERVIEWER

What is he parodying?

LAUGHLIN

Anything that came into his head. There's one section called "The Ladies of Tlatilco," where he's writing about the beauty of the ancient Mexican Indian women; it is almost entirely cribbed from the ads in the *New Yorker*, for ladies' beauty products and clothes. It's exquisitely funny. He does that often. He will take a text of something he's been reading in anthropology and parody it. With myth he also does extraordinary things, as with the Cargo Cults literature and the stories of the Dakota Indians' ghost dances. He had a great gift for selective condensation from his reading. Pound had this, too. He was able to select the kernel, the core, the colorful detail that dramatizes history. Williams did this in *In the American Grain*.

INTERVIEWER

In an earlier interview you mentioned, with respect to Merton, that he was able to create an extremely vivid world; you went on to note that most of the great poets were also able to do that. What is the appeal in creating a "world"?

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti (top left), San Francisco, 1970. Photo: Ann Laughlin. Thomas Merton (top right) at Gethsemane Monastery. Probably about 1970. Photographer uncertain, but may have been John Howard Griffin. The young Delmore Schwartz (bottom). No one can remember who took the photo.

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Henry Miller at the door of his cabin on Partington Ridge in Big Sur, Cal. Probably about 1955. Photo: JL.

LAUGHLIN

Many people want to get out of the world they're in. They want to get into someone else's world that's more exciting and more interesting. The great poets create their personal worlds. Pound made his diachronic and intercultural world, Williams made *Paterson*, Robert Duncan is busy making his world, Merton made his in *The Geography of Lograire*, Hart Crane made his in *The Bridge.*

INTERVIEWER

Is there any shared element in these various poets' "worlds," or are they all in a sense idiosyncratic visions?

LAUGHLIN

I think the best poets since Pound have taken something from him. Williams did, even though *Paterson* is unlike the *Cantos*, except in elements of its structure. Both are collages, big mosaics, built by association out of memory and reading.

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JL and Gary Snyder at Kitkitdizze, Gary's home in the Sierras. About 1975. Photo: Ann Laughlin.

INTERVIEWER

What was it Williams borrowed?

LAUGHLIN

Certain attitudes about how you write poetry and what you think about. Duncan has drawn on Pound. Over the centuries poetry is a continuous process of reformulation and adaptation. At a certain point Eliot and Pound decided that free verse had become squashy. So they read the Bay State Hymnbook, the poems of Théophile Gautier and Corbière; they read the Greek poet Bion, and out of that mix came the strict forms of Eliot's hippopotamus poems and Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." (By the way, Basil Bunting says that Pound once told him that "Mauberley" was a hoax, inspired by a hoax perpetrated by Samuel Butler. Well, for a hoax it's a great poem.) There is a continual plowing up of old poetic ground, from which elements are given new life. Poets have this instinct to seek forebears, to seek ancestors. Yet they want to be new, to do their new thing, to "make it new," as Ezra said. Pound was constantly drawn to the past, picking out from the past what he thought was "the live tradition."

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INTERVIEWER

What was it like to have Delmore Schwartz working for you?

LAUGHLIN

Delmore, again, was one of the great talkers, particularly as a parodist. He was a marvelous mimic and fantasist and confabulator. He didn't do a great deal of work at New Directions. He put much of the work off onto his wife Gertrude, except the night the Charles River flooded in Cambridge. Then Delmore had to carry up the books from the basement. But he more than made up for it with his charm. Before he went off his head, he was utterly charming. He was very helpful in reading scripts. He had excellent taste.

INTERVIEWER

Did you realize right from the start when he began attacking you that there was something terribly wrong?

LAUGHLIN

I knew that he was ill and arranged to have him go to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist didn't do him much good. It became clear that he had a problem, and all his friends knew that. There was increasingly difficult and quarrelsome and eccentric behavior. I guess he was paranoid.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned several times in the past that you think Henry Miller is underrated. By way of developing the case for Henry Miller, could you offer some detail on what you value so highly in his work?

LAUGHLIN

One problem with Miller is that he wrote so much you must pick and choose to get at the best. *Tropic of Cancer* is a marvelous book. Did I tell you how I got to know about Henry? One day I was having lunch with Ezra in 1935 in Rapallo, and he threw a paperback across the table. "Well,

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Jas, here's a dirty book that's pretty good." I wrote to Henry and we got into correspondence. I arranged to do a selection of his pieces called *The Cosmological Eye*. When Miller is good, he is very good. Probably his best book is *The Colossus of Maroussi*, the one about Greece. But he wrote many fine shorter pieces. You'd have to go through and sort them out.

INTERVIEWER

Isn't this the case with Gertrude Stein? You've described changing tires and rewriting copy to try to help her present her lectures in the States. But later things seemed to change quite a bit. You said in several interviews that you were afraid she wasn't moving on.

LAUGHLIN

I don't think that she did move on from her remarkable early work. She got deeper and deeper into automatic writing, which she was beginning at the time I worked for her. Automatic writing is a dead end. You go on writing "automatically" and what do you write? If you look at those later books that Yale published for her after she gave them her papers, they're pretty boring.

I used to watch Gertrude at it. That summer I spent in Savoie writing those press releases for *Lectures in America*, I'd watch her sitting in a bath chair on her terrace with a big notebook, writing just as fast as she could, the pen flying, no pauses whatsoever. No rewriting. And then Alice B. Toklas, sweet person—well, not all that sweet, *sort* of sweet—would be given these notebooks to type out. Her best work came early: *Three Lives, The Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*, parts of *The Making of Americans*, *Portrait of Mabel Dodge*. *Four Saints in Three Acts* was beautiful, and some of the other plays, the opera plays. She really needed someone like Virgil Thomson, whom she respected, to sit on her a bit and make her devise some plot. In the automatic writing pieces there's no plot movement; they just roll on and become tedious.

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INTERVIEWER

What's your feeling now about her importance?

LAUGHLIN

What's interesting is that now so many of the younger writers are reading her seriously, people such as David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, and Robert Duncan, among others. I think this indicates that something significant *is* there. Then, too, Williams was so much influenced by her. Those two essays he wrote about her. It's clear if you read Williams's "Improvisations" that he had been profoundly influenced by the work of hers which he saw in Alfred Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work*. This doesn't come out in Williams's autobiography because Gertrude and Floss Williams had a fight. You know how Gertrude and Bill broke up? One evening at her place in Paris she took out a big stack of her manuscripts and asked Bill what to do with them. Bill replied in his "Billyums" way, "I'd pick out the best one and throw the rest away." This was an impossible thing to tell Gertrude, who believed her every word was Great Art. Alice B. Toklas showed the Williamses to the door.

INTERVIEWER

Many times you've talked about how you met Tennessee Williams, but could you comment on why you think so much of him as a poet?

LAUGHLIN

He's a wonderful romantic poet. He comes right out of Romanticism, and no one else has done that kind of thing so well recently. He has beautiful imagery. His line is perhaps a little loose, but he's a fine poet. I think that if he hadn't written his great plays, he'd be more recognized as a poet. Some of the poems have wonderful humor, such as "Life Story." The poem about his sister Rose (the Laura of *The Glass Menagerie*), "The Paper Lantern," is a little masterpiece.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think his poetry is good enough that readers will

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begin to recognize him as a poet?

LAUGHLIN

His poetry was swamped by his being such a famous playwright. Readers tend to pigeonhole writers. He was a magnificent story-writer. There are few story-writers today who touch him for pure narrative drive, psychological penetration, and that lovely fantastic, light, self-mocking style.

INTERVIEWER

Dylan Thomas. What was your relationship with him like?

LAUGHLIN

It was difficult, because he always wanted to drink. I went on one bender with him in London which lasted for two days and three nights. We ended up sleeping on the floor of some lady's apartment and neither of us knew who she was. He always wanted to drink, but I'm not such a great drinker.

INTERVIEWER

Did his drinking get in the way for you?

LAUGHLIN

Yes. When he came to New York he'd come in the office at ten o'clock in the morning and say, "Let's go to the White Horse Tavern." I'd say, "Dylan, I've got work to do." So he'd go off to the White Horse and meet various cronies and sycophants. Sometimes I'd join him late in the evening. He was a sad case, Dylan; he was basically a nice person, and when he started boozing he was very amusing, but he would never stop; he'd go on and on. It's very hard to get close to a drinker. There was always that thing between us, the boozing. He was a great talker, too; he was a wonderful talker, but I had work to do. When Dylan drank he wanted people to be with him, to listen to him. It was a method of attracting people. But he was very indiscriminate about whom he would attract. He had a bunch of hangers-on in New York, such as that jerk Oscar Williams, who were crumbs. That was

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a barrier, because he'd be with such crummy characters. You couldn't really have a conversation with Dylan when he was drinking. It wore me down. John Davenport had a good name for Dylan. He called him "Old Messy." He was. He was messy because of the drinking. You couldn't count on him. If you wanted to do something you couldn't count on his turning up sober or on time.

INTERVIEWER

How about your relationship with Kenneth Patchen?

LAUGHLIN

Kenneth I knew very well. He and Miriam worked here in the Norfolk office. I was deeply fond of them both. I was sorry for him; he seemed to have a chip on his shoulder about life. He had those big sad brown eyes. He had unendurable pain from his bad back. He was sometimes difficult to work with. He was a most conscientious employee, but as a writer he could be difficult to work with because he wanted to design his own books, and he wasn't that good a designer. His layouts were a bit heavy-handed.

INTERVIEWER

Did you get along pretty well with him?

LAUGHLIN

Except for a few arguments. When we did the *Collected Poems* there was a fuss because he'd written so many poems. If we'd included all of them it would have made a two-thousand-page volume. We argued over what length the book could be and what should go into it. He was mighty unhappy about that. But it just wasn't practical to do a two-thousand-page book. His public, mostly young people, couldn't have bought it. And he was uneven. Some poems were very good and some were not. I thought that I was doing him a favor by cutting out the repetitive poems.

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INTERVIEWER

What attracts you to Denise Levertov's work?

LAUGHLIN

For me, she's the best of the organic form poets. She has that so important ability that Williams had: she knows where to end the line. Very few poets know where to end the line. This is terribly important in free verse. Pound had it. His finest free verse is in the "Homage to Sextus Propertius." He knew where to end or break the line. And so does Denise.

INTERVIEWER

Is that something she's had to work at?

LAUGHLIN

Yes. Her first book, *The Double Image*, was somewhat in the vein of the so-called New Romantic School in London—rather conventional, not very original in technique. Then she married Mitch Goodman, an American GI, came to this country, and began reading Williams. Almost immediately she figured out from Williams how to write good free verse. Her two early American books sounded much like Williams's voice. She was beginning to learn his technique, but the voice was what colored them. Then when she found her *own* voice, when she was completely herself, she became terribly good. One thing that I admire so much in Denise is her social commitment, the way she goes to jail for things that she believes in and climbs over fences to picket nuclear plants. This is admirable. Carolyn Forché has the same dedication.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of her discipline as a poet?

LAUGHLIN

She constructs her poems with the greatest care. Listen to the sound patterns of her lines and look at the way the lines are placed on the page. She is a superb technician. She makes it sound free and easy. But you examine it and you'll see it

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Elizabeth Bishop, whose poems JL was put onto by Marianne Moore—three appear in the first New Directions Annual *(1936) —standing on the doorstep of the Square Roof, the most respectable bordello in Key West. With JL and Tennessee Williams she had gone there for tea. Photo by JL, about 1958.*

Denise Levertov and JL at the lake house in Connecticut, probably about 1967. Photo: probably Ann Laughlin.

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isn't. It's very disciplined, very carefully done. I think a time comes when poets find that discipline becomes almost spontaneous. The line arrives in their heads in the shape and form they want.

INTERVIEWER

What is it that "rings the bell" for you with Gary Snyder's work?

LAUGHLIN

The limpidity of it; his sure, good technique; the mixture of thought content with human examples. Most of his poems are about a subject, but he will bring in persons to illustrate what he's talking about.

INTERVIEWER

Have you developed a fairly close personal relationship with Snyder?

LAUGHLIN

We write back and forth. We visited him once at his place in the Sierras and had a fine time. The little house that he built is a mixture of Japanese and Indian (American Indian) style. We met his nice Japanese wife and his two boys. He's a happy person to be with. Maybe it's his Zen training. He has a deep spiritual quality, but without any pretension. There's no pretension about Gary at all. He's one of the people I feel really has a soul. Gary is a charismatic figure. His ecological work is so important. I sometimes wish he would sacrifice his private life a bit to be more a public figure. He is such a good speaker and so charismatic that he could have wide popular influence if he would become, not a politician, but someone like a Ralph Nader, working to save the earth.

INTERVIEWER

Does this statement about Snyder fit in with your notions from way back about the poet as leader?

LAUGHLIN

He is a leader already. His books are widely read. But he

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could do more. He did make an attempt when Jerry Brown, the former Governor of California, put him on his Arts Council. I haven't seen Gary since then, and I don't know how much he was able to accomplish. But that is the sort of thing I'd like to see him do more of.

INTERVIEWER

There seems to be an unusual consistency in the quality of the personal relationships you've had with many of your writers. Do you have any sense of why you're able to maintain those relationships, even though you don't see these authors very often?

LAUGHLIN

I write to them occasionally and see them when I can. I hope they feel I'm someone they can turn to if they need something—advice or attention or a loan.

INTERVIEWER

Sounds as though you're returning to Pound's dictum—do something useful. Is that something you do instinctively?

LAUGHLIN

It's instinctive. You like someone, and you do what you can to help him out. I don't make anything of it. I've just been lucky to pick authors who happen to be great people. I look back over the people I've published and I think there've only been two stinkers.

INTERVIEWER

Can you say who these two "stinkers" are?

LAUGHLIN

That would not be in good taste. *De Mortuis nihil nisi bonum.*

INTERVIEWER

You spent five years working for the Ford Foundation on

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Perspectives. What effect did your years with *Perspectives* have on your acquisition of Oriental titles?

LAUGHLIN

I met Raja Rao in Trivandrum and was greatly impressed with him. He's a remarkable writer and a true Vedantist. He put me on to his book *Kanthapura*, which is perhaps the most authentic novel of South India. *Kanthapura* carries on the tradition of village oral literature in India, which goes back thousands of years. Most of the population there couldn't read Sanskrit, so they got their religion and history through the village speaker. Raja Rao has picked this up in the narrative voice of the old woman in a typical village. She tells the story of life in the village and how Gandhi affected it. It's a powerful and perfect little book. Then I met the Frenchman Alain Danielou, the brother of the Jesuit Cardinal Danielou. He had gone to India as a young man and had become a Hindu. He was living, when I first knew him, in a tiny palace on the banks of the Ganges in Benares. I liked him immediately and we've become great friends. He told me about a wonderful old-time Tamil classic, the *Shilappadikaram, The Ankle Bracelet*, a beautiful mythic novel of early Chola days. He had already translated it into French. He's perfect in English, so I persuaded him to retranslate it into English. It is certainly one of the most important Indian books that I have published.

INTERVIEWER

Had you intended to concentrate so heavily on Asia?

LAUGHLIN

No, that came along later. The original project was to do *Perspectives* in four languages: English, French, German, and Italian. There'd been a big gap during the war when nothing cultural from America came to Europe, and the magazine was planned to fill that gap. We had articles on architecture, art, philosophy, etc., and, of course, stories and poems. The idea was to give a catch-up course in recent

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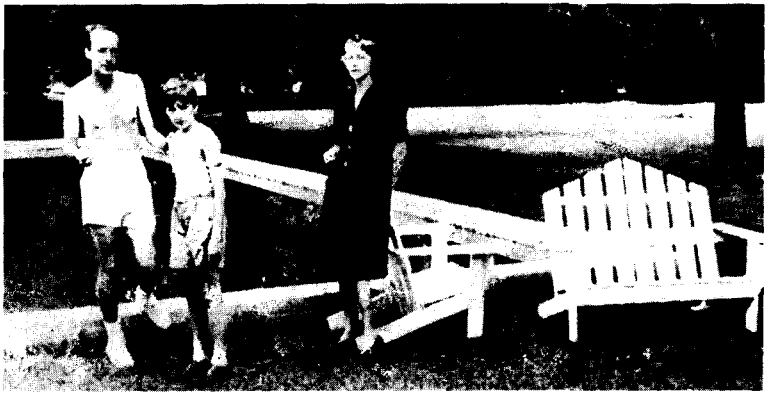

Vladimir, Dmitri (now a famous opera singer), and Vera Nabokov at the Paul Keysers' (JL's first in-laws) swimming pool in Salt Lake City in 1965. That summer, Nabokov and JL climbed Lone Peak in the Wasatch Mountains in search of a rare butterfly often found circling the summit. Nabokov caught two with his butterfly net. On the descent, the two climbers began sliding out of control down a freezing snowslide towards a cliff edge. Nabokov managed to bring his net down over a rock as he slid past; the rock held, and Nabokov, with JL hanging onto his leg, kept the two from going over. The two laboriously cut steps into the ice with a pocketknife Nabokov was carrying and managed to reach safety.

American culture. Then later the Indian project got started. They sent me out there to work on the Indian Southern Languages Book Trust, which I set up and which was a glorious flop, because the Indians had trouble doing distribution in a businesslike way. At the outset, *Perspectives* was all "outflow" from the U.S.A. Then we decided that since cultural exchange should be a two-way street we must have some "inflow," presenting the culture of other countries. To do that, rather than try to set up our own magazine with all the expense of building a circulation, we rode piggyback on the *Atlantic*, courtesy of Ted Weeks. Ted gave us forty-eight pages at the back of the magazine. They paid for the printing and distribution, so all we had to do was get the material together. We did nine of these special supplements. I edited the *Perspectives* of Burma and Germany and had a wonderful time in those countries.

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INTERVIEWER

Do you continue to be able to draw the Oriental titles?

LAUGHLIN

Bob MacGregor, my former managing director, was the one who thought of reprinting the Irving Babbitt translation of the *Dhammapada*. It's one of the basic scriptures of Buddhism. We've not done much Orientalia recently—though there is a collection, called *Rasa*, of the essays and translations of a curious and very interesting Frenchman, René Daumal. Ferlinghetti published his beautiful little symbolic novel, *Mount Analogue*. *Rasa* is a strictly scholarly book, but it appealed to me very much because of my interest in Oriental religion from the time I'd spent in India and also the two years I spent working on Merton's *Asian Journal*, when I had to read, in order to verify his texts and quotations, so many Buddhist and Hindu sacred books.

INTERVIEWER

Your eyes seem to light up when you start talking about some of the German literary figures. Is there something about German literature in general that attracts you?

LAUGHLIN

I should say first that I find German very difficult. It's a language that I've never been able to master; the abstract words all sound too much alike to me. But I read a lot of Goethe and Schiller when I was in Harvard. I was crazy about Hölderlin, Kafka, Rilke, Celan, and Kleist. Kleist is one of my favorites. I think *The Prince of Homburg* is one of the great plays of world literature.

INTERVIEWER

Have you had much personal contact with your foreign writers? Michaux, for example?

LAUGHLIN

Michaux I knew when I was living in Paris. I loved

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Michaux. I was brought to him by Richard Ellmann. Ellmann translated a selection of his poetry for New Directions. And we did Sylvia Beach's translation of his travel book, *A Barbarian in Asia.* But then I dropped away from Michaux. I didn't like his drug books. I couldn't understand them. First of all—what was he talking about? And I've never been very sympathetic to the whole idea of drugs. Michaux became annoyed with me when I didn't take on those books. However, he seems to have forgiven me and we'll be doing his little book on Chinese ideograms. This is the book Pound wanted to translate in his old age but hadn't the strength.

INTERVIEWER

Céline?

LAUGHLIN

Céline I met. I once went out to see him when he was living in Meudon, an industrial suburb of Paris near the Renault plant. He had a small house, and outside it there was a high barbed-wire fence. He had two very fierce dogs that barked at me when I rang the gate bell. He had to come out and tie up the dogs. This was because Denöel, his publisher, had been murdered on a street in Paris. Denöel had been a collaborator, too. Céline was rather paranoid, but he was friendly to me. I had had contact with his wife, who was a ballet dancer. While they were in exile in Denmark during the war, she couldn't get ballet shoes for her practice. So she used to write to me and I'd go down to Capezio in New York to buy her ballet shoes and air-mail them over to her.

INTERVIEWER

That's an interesting publisher service.

LAUGHLIN

She went through a lot of ballet shoes.

INTERVIEWER

Outside Europe, where are the strongest concentrations of writers?

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LAUGHLIN

Latin America.

INTERVIEWER

Do you locate most of your foreign writers through contacts with individuals in the country?

LAUGHLIN

It varies. There's no general plan. Many manuscripts come to us from translators who are professors in American colleges who've gotten interested in a given writer. But others come on the recommendations of French or Italian or German publishers with whom we're in touch. Others come on the recommendation of writers we've published.

INTERVIEWER

Earlier we talked about some of the problems foreign writers have and Helen Wolff's comment that the foreign writers often do not get the reviews they need. Do you have any ideas about solutions or ways of going at the problem?

LAUGHLIN

No. American reviewing is hopeless. I think that Harvey Shapiro at the *New York Times* did his very best. He tried to be evenhanded and review all different kinds of books, but there are just too many. Generally speaking, there aren't enough places where reviews of serious writing appear. The *New York Review of Books* is good but can't cover much with such long reviews. There's also the space problem. The newspapers don't want to give space to an industry which doesn't advertise much. New York publishers usually confine their advertising to the *New York Times* and three or four other papers. So papers that don't get advertising won't give space for reviews. The good thing about the London *Times Literary Supplement* is that, except for the lead article, they keep their reviews short. Thus they can get in reviews of fifty or sixty books. That means exposure for many titles.

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INTERVIEWER

You wrote admiringly in the thirties and forties in the New Directions anthology of the "pure" writers. Who are the pure writers today who are refusing to betray their genius?

LAUGHLIN

Jack Hawkes, Walter Abish, Raymond Carver, Jerry Rothenberg, Annie Dillard, Russell Haley, and a good number of others. They're doing their new things, paying little attention to whether the books sell or what the critics say about them. I think Abish's *How German Is It?* is a very "pure" book. I always tell the New Directions writers, "Don't read your reviews."

INTERVIEWER

Have you seen direct, negative examples where writers have started paying attention to reviews?

LAUGHLIN

Jack Hawkes reads his reviews. Sometimes he'll call me up, upset by a review. I tell him, "Jack, do your thing. Don't pay any attention to those bastards. How often does a good enough critic review your work so you're going to learn anything from him?" Many critics talk about themselves and then give very superficial opinions about the work. We don't have many Edmund Wilsons around these days. But a writer should pay attention to what John Updike writes. Or to what Hayden Carruth says in his poetry reviews.

INTERVIEWER

How did you happen to come across Kafka's *Amerika*?

LAUGHLIN

It came from England. Edwin Muir and his wife translated it in England and for some reason Schocken, who publish Kafka here, had not done it.

INTERVIEWER

It's clear that a large number of your acquisitions have

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come because you've listened to other writers and scholars. Do you think commercial publishers listen enough?

LAUGHLIN

I don't know. Fran McCullough listened, kept her ear to the ground, and then Harper and Row fired her after seventeen years. Said her books didn't make enough money. There are others who listen—Gordon Lish, for example. He reads the little magazines, and he gets around. Bob Giroux must listen because he is our greatest literary editor.

INTERVIEWER

You've said at one time or another that formal discipline is essential for good writing.

LAUGHLIN

There was a period when Delmore Schwartz wrote a sonnet every day. He didn't really like sonnets, but he wrote them for discipline. It certainly helped him. If you look at his best short poems, they're not sonnets, but they're very well structured. So too with Pound. There was a time early on when Ezra used to chant his lines to a metronome, though he gave it up after a while—another way to learn verbal discipline and control.

INTERVIEWER

What role has creative writing played in your own life?

LAUGHLIN

From boarding school on I wanted to be a writer. I didn't want to go into the family steel business. I was not *then* attracted to the academic world, though I am *now*. I wanted to be a writer. I wrote a story, which won the *Atlantic* Prize. I won the *Story Magazine* Prize twice. I was writing unplotted stories and enjoying it and writing little poems.

INTERVIEWER

When Pound advised you in 1935 not to pursue a career

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as a poet, what was your reaction?

LAUGHLIN

I guessed he was probably right.

INTERVIEWER

Had you had your own doubts before he said what he did?

LAUGHLIN

No. I was trying. But I knew I wasn't turning out much that was up to his standards. I showed him my things. He'd mark them all up and tell me what was wrong with them. I wasn't much surprised that he told me to become a publisher, not a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever regretted allowing that exchange to lead you into publishing and in the process to minimize the amount of time for your own writing?

LAUGHLIN

No, because I don't think, to put it very simply, that I was ready in 1935 to do my later kind of poetry (which is quite different from what I was writing when I was with Pound). And when I *was* ready to do it, Bill Williams encouraged me. The new metric began to work for me, but it was entirely different from what Ezra had seen.

INTERVIEWER

Your self-imposed guidelines are visual, but the force of the American idiom comes through.

LAUGHLIN

That comes from Williams. The cadence in my poems is a natural-breath, American speech cadence. But to get tension I manipulate the line lengths.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever wished that you had more time to write?

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LAUGHLIN

I'd like to. I'd write more stories if I could think up plots. I've written a few lectures about the work of Pound and Williams which I "perform" at colleges. A friend has persuaded me to start on a book of literary recollections. In *New Directions 45* we included a story from my "Paris period" called "The River." Reprinting it was pure sentimentality and nostalgia.

INTERVIEWER

It's a nice story.

LAUGHLIN

It's a tribute to and an imitation of Gertrude Stein; it uses her repetition. No plot; nothing much happens. A mood piece. But in my poems I try to make things happen quickly. They all come to me from somewhere in space (or my subconscious?); they arrive whole. So I don't need much time to write them. They arrive in my head in the cadence of colloquial speech; the beginning and end are there. Then I need only type them out and tailor the lines to nearly equal lengths in each couplet. I'm a "typewriter versifier." We are typewriter, and now word-processer, people. Occasionally if a word won't fit the pattern, I'll have to find another one which sounds the same but is longer or shorter to replace it. I know this sounds crazy, but for my ear and eye it works. "Cal" Lowell once wrote in the *Hudson Review* that I learned this bizarre metric from Williams. In fairness to Williams this should be corrected. He was a master of visual patterns, but he never counted typewriter characters.

INTERVIEWER

You seem ambivalent about the publication of your poetry and writing, but you have continued to publish all through the years.

LAUGHLIN

I put out five tiny poetry books—all privately printed—and I've sent out poems to magazines. Then Lawrence Fer-

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linghetti and Robert Fitzgerald persuaded me to have a commercial book with City Lights. It is called *In Another Country*. I wouldn't have done it if Fitzgerald hadn't agreed to make the selection of poems for it. I didn't feel confident in my own critical ability to make the choice.

INTERVIEWER

In the *Festschrift* that *Conjunctions* did for you, an impressive array of well-recognized poets said your poetry should get more attention.

LAUGHLIN

That was very kind of them.

INTERVIEWER

Denise Levertov said, "Laughlin hasn't given himself the pleasure that one should derive for poetry well-wrought, and his is well-wrought poetry."

LAUGHLIN

Denise, bless her, has been a great fan. Another friend who often urges me to write verse is Hayden Carruth. Marjorie Perloff has been encouraging me. She likes my love poems. And Aleksis Rannit and David Gordon help me. But poetry for me has always been just a hobby, for personal satisfaction, and I'm quite content to keep it that way.

INTERVIEWER

Does the prospect of attention beyond your circle of close friends bother you?

LAUGHLIN

I'm always nervous when I do poetry readings. The verse is so eccentric and so personal. Brendan Gill once said to me (he had read something of mine): "You have a pretty hard time, don't you?" I said, "What do you mean, Brendan?" He said, "Sorting out your private and public personalities."

INTERVIEWER

Is that perhaps the reason you've been reluctant to have it go any further?

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LAUGHLIN

I think so. Eliot told someone that when he gave a poetry reading he always felt it was a kind of indecent exposure.

INTERVIEWER

And you feel similarly?

LAUGHLIN

Yes. I feel I'm exposing myself, perhaps because so much of it is love poetry. I wonder what impression people get of what my life has been, writing so many poems about girls. I'm very romantic.

INTERVIEWER

I like the poem called "The Trout." The image in there, the "blue-blonde trout."

LAUGHLIN

Trout, the way it's cooked in Europe in those funny pans, comes out blue. The girl in the poem was very blonde, and I just put the two together.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have to do anything to provoke the mood in which images come up from the subconscious?

LAUGHLIN

I think they come at a moment when I'm emotionally exhilarated, exalted by something.

INTERVIEWER

In a poem called "Empty Day" you talk about needing to clear the deck of everything before you can start. Did it have to do with getting ready to write poetry?

LAUGHLIN

I don't think so. Perhaps it was a reaction to overwork, being continually under pressure to get out the correspon-

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dence or to read the New Directions manuscripts. It was a complaint. I remember that Rexroth placed great importance on giving himself empty days for meditation. He and I were skiing once up at Mineral King, a very remote place in the Sierras. You have to walk in about twenty miles. We made camp there and pitched a tent. Next day I climbed up the mountain on my skis. But Rexroth spent the entire day sitting on a stump in the sun meditating. I could see him from up on the mountain. He never moved all day. He just sat on that stump and meditated. He was taking an "empty day" to think. To contemplate. He was a Buddhist, you know, as well as being an anarchist, though he converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. It was his way of purging himself of surface preoccupations.

INTERVIEWER

You wrote a poem called "Step on His Head," in which children step on the shadow of their father's head. Had your children started stepping on your head when you wrote that poem?

LAUGHLIN

No, not at all. They were very little—I don't remember how old they were—maybe four and six. Though the battle between the generations is something that happens in almost every family, even those with the best of intentions to avoid it. I think that's the poem most people like best because it does mean something to them. They've experienced it themselves. Of course, it goes back to that passage in Gertrude Stein, which you probably know, where she begins *The Making of Americans*. A son is dragging his father through the orchard by the feet. The father is getting pretty beat up. They come to a certain tree and he says to the son, "Stop. This is as far as I dragged *my* father." It's a marvelous opening to a book.

INTERVIEWER

Your demeanor is so gentle, yet a poem such as "The

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Summons" offers a scathing indictment of war. It's simply not a gentle statement. Do you reserve your anger for special causes or moments?

LAUGHLIN

Perhaps my hatred of war came largely from Pound. That was something he was always talking about—the causes of war and how to stop it. That became deeply rooted in my consciousness. I am enraged by these stupid, useless wars that we keep getting into. There may have been something tolerable about war in Provence when the troubadour knights would ride out in armor—it was like a game—but our recent wars have just been dirty. It's pure destruction. It's everything that Ezra was against. He ends the *Cantos*: "To be men not destroyers." I'm angry, also again from Ezra, at our economic system, which I think is ridiculous. It's becoming worse every day because the bankers and politicians continue to pile up debt. That's in my poem "What the Animals Did," the poem against the conglomerators.

INTERVIEWER

Your poetry, then, seems to involve a mix of Pound's drive for the Roman keystone and Williams's drive toward the unique American idiom. Is that a fair statement of where you're headed?

LAUGHLIN

Absolutely. They were the two big influences.

INTERVIEWER

In one of your poems you described a plant as so fragile-looking, yet strong and solid. What's the meaning of that poem?

LAUGHLIN

That would be "The Wild Anemone." It was the one written to my wife. The wild anemone resists the wind. In the wind the anemone sways so gracefully, but the wind can't blow it over.

INTERVIEWER

What prompted the "Mountain Afterglow"?

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LAUGHLIN

I was out at Alta, feeling very depressed about World War II. I watched the mountain afterglow, and the idea came to me. That poem has something I like in the way I used hard consonants for the ending to give the feeling of the rock mountain. "Bright rock and snow fade into night/Night clouds fold dark on the stars." That particular evening the afterglow was very red, which made me think of blood. That made me think of war, and then that made me think of Christ's blood, and it all pulled together just from that redness.

INTERVIEWER

You have mentioned elsewhere that you showed up in Saul Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*.

LAUGHLIN

Bellow was writing about Delmore Schwartz. It's a very accurate portrait. Delmore was always inventing fantastic schemes. One of them was that he would persuade Bob Hutchins, whom he had met through me, to have the Ford Foundation endow a chair of poetry for him at Princeton. Bellow handles this very nicely. Hutchins is called "Longseth." There's a good portrait of Hutchins, who was a very debonair man as well as a brilliant one. And I was called "my playboy publisher."

INTERVIEWER

Why "playboy" publisher?

LAUGHLIN

That came out of the fact that once Delmore sent a manuscript to me at Alta which got lost in the bottom of the mailman's truck coming up the canyon. It was some time before it was recovered. Delmore was very agitated. He said that I would have to decide whether I was going to be a playboy or a publisher.

INTERVIEWER

Are you amused by that portrait in there?

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Pound and JL walking up the salita (stoney path) from Rapallo to San Ambrogio. This must be about 1962. Photo: Ann Laughlin.

Ezra Pound with portrait bust by Oloff de Wet, 1965. Photo: Giorgio Vaio, Rapallo, Italy.

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LAUGHLIN

Very much. I think it's funny and very well done.

INTERVIEWER

Hayden Carruth has said that he suspects you have a lot of unpublished poetry and stories hidden away in a file drawer somewhere. Is he correct?

LAUGHLIN

No. I've thrown away the poems that didn't work out, and most of the others are either embalmed in my little early books or have been in magazines. As for stories, I haven't written any since college days, so most of them are in the *Harvard Advocate* or *Story Magazine*. That's a long way back. But recently something strange has happened. At my age one doesn't normally branch out in new directions. I have begun to try two, for me, new kinds of writing. First there are poems in the tradition of the macaronic. These are poems written in, or quoting from, more than one language—English and Latin, English and Italian or French, or all four mixed—where the intention is to have the languages "work" on each other. Obviously, this comes from Pound's polylingualism and his ideogrammic method of incongruous (or congruent) juxtaposition. Then, from both Pound and Williams, I have been writing "collages," abandoning my old short, visual pattern lines for a long, prose-cadence line. These sometimes come out as verse and sometimes as little prose-poetry paragraphs. The idiom is a mixture of colloquial and more elevated language. Again, the two tones "working" on each other. These are memory poems: my memories of others and memories of how their lives affected mine. And they are heavily studded with quotations from the work of earlier poets which comment on and illuminate the relationships. I hope these writings are not parodies; I don't so intend them. I mean them to be tributes, and, more than that, expressions of my gratitude to the poets who have done so much for me: Pound, Williams, Eliot, and many others.

—**Richard Ziegfeld**

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James Baker Hall

Traveling by Moonlight

Times when the mountain is not here
except as the bells of cattle grazing
in the fog, or higher up, on the tropical side,
as the sound of water falling—I sit on the slopes,
in the middle

of the hinge, along the margins.
The sun rises in the form
of a mountain, erupting
out of it, the way
the island began

and continues to begin
each day. Times

when it is all here, even the part
beneath the surface, even the one man
alone there on the higher slopes—
Two paths leave the rim from either side

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and descend, snatched away
by the weather,
returned, white lines
squiggling into the distance—
as though those who follow unravel
as they go, like hopes.
One flower survives.

There are birds at certain times
of the day: they stand, one leg
banded, facing the weather.
We know where they go only
when they come back.

When the sky goes,
when the wind follows,

everything stands on one leg, motionless,
until even that is gone. Even the light
is elsewhere—as though the moon comes here

to sleep. At night, when the crater is full
of shadows, it's as though the moon
awakes again, overhead,

to watch. I find myself listening
to my footsteps in the red ash
as though someone else makes them,
a long time ago—

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Two Poems by Tess Gallagher

Eating the Sparrows

A platter of walnuts, I think.
Shanghai and the banquet is festive.
Strong Chinese brandy and "Campi!"
so we drink to the bottom.
The sparrows drop to my plate, their
tiny drumsticks clamped to their sides,
a nub of wings, a slash of beak. "Eat!"
our host says. My mouth flickers and
swoops in the tall room. Sparrows, why
you should come to me with your
slivers of meat and your songless sky
I don't know. Nor how you fell, by what
blow or trick, what feast of crumbs.
Who asked for your sacrifice? Do
your deaths cross from famine
onto this plentiful island of friendship?
I watch the host, nimble
over the carcass with pleasure. It is time
to pick up your unlucky sparrow, believe
against your safety. Sparrow,
your message is clear: it is not too late
for my singing.

Guilin/June 17, 1983

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Some Painful Butterflies Pass Through

I saw the old Chinese men standing
in Nanjing under the trees where
they had hung their caged birds
in the early morning as though a cage
were only another branch that travels with
us. The bird revolves and settles,
moving its mind up and down the tree
with leaves and light. It sings
with the free birds—what else
can it do? They sit on the rungs
and preen or jit back and down and
back. But they are busy
and a day in the sky makes wings
of them. Then some painful butterflies
pass through.

The old men talk and smoke, examine
each other's cages. They feel restored,
as if they'd given themselves a tree, a sky
full of companions, song
that can travel. They depend
on their birds, and if their love stories
swing from their arms as they walk
homeward, it may be they are chosen
after all like one tree
with one bird that is faithful,
an injured voice traveling high into silence
with one accustomed listener
who smiles and walks slowly with
his face in the distance so
the pleasure spreads and the treasured
singing and the little bursts
of flying.

Shanghai/June 11, 1983

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Nicholas Christopher

Sunday, Looking Westward

1.

A wall of fire steals across the prairie
and the string quartet in the downstairs parlor
breaks off suddenly when a blizzard of light invades our sleep,
our overlapping dreams which we dismiss knowingly, sweetly,
as the mirror of our passing lives, the music on the other side
of ourselves that never breaks off—or so we pray
on such mornings as these, Sunday amid the alfalfa, two hills'
distance from the green river with its fertile banks,
its hot mud of baptism and forgetting and slow birth. . .
In these tall, too-white rooms the gold dust of wheat and maize
hangs passively behind the sunlit curtains, and the conversation
of the barefoot girls wafts up to us from the road,
the easy bells of their voices that will ring in our ears
long after they are gone and talked past their passionate and idle
adventures of the night, the quicker passion of innocence,
which for us has become so many murky dreams and quartets and
preoccupations (like baggage) too hastily packed and too easily lost.
As if in coming here, to these spaces, open and unbounded,
we sought to relinquish the finer points of our solitude,

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the granite corridors and violent crowd scenes from
someone else's
tragedy, and the murderous clowns in our own comedy:
as if assured that without means of ascent we cannot fall,
and without descending fiery stairwells
we'll never suffer the more obvious torments.
Here it's the flatness drives young men to despair,
and while we seek only long vistas and plenitude of light,
perhaps their—this other—despair will bring us
to the brink of something fruitful and bright, to the
river's
edge in the packed early light of goshawks and crows,
the river of pain and plenty, of landlocked lovers
and sinful downstream melodies that distract the eye from
the land:
that green harmony of water and light, of blue and yellow,
that solid compromise of two elements forever elusive.
For the interloper, especially, understands this fixation
on the hazy passionless fields unbounded, understands it
at times
better than the landscape of solitude (and music) that is
his own domain.

2.

There is that golden, sexless smell of baked bread
climbing the side of the house, surviving the hot scents
of the roses and the vaporous tangle of honeysuckle,
curling up through bushes and vines crisscrossed
by the quick, murmuring bees—the smell of
white bread glazed with butter cooling on a windowsill.
Four horses left to pasture ramble smartly from fence to
fence
and a black cat streaks through the red flowerbeds
and someone down in the parlor mentions yesterday's
funeral
and tomorrow's dance an instant before the interrupted
quartet

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resumes its shiver and throb of heartstrings and bass,
winding its false promise of rain through the warm, dry house.
And we begin to wonder what variation of quickened blood
we have brought to this place in midsummer under the rollicking clouds—
we the privileged visitors transported from the labyrinth
with such apparent ease and density of purpose and lack of motive.
Content for the moment to whirl safflower honey
onto our heated bread, to take our pick of the golden horses
and sweep up a bouquet of damp carnations before setting out
across the river for yet another dance.
And is this so much peace and contentment
as the indulgence of the dream that a place not our own
(like certain music, forever on the other side of ourselves)
is by definition that much more paradisal or infernal?
When we are very young, it is the exotic brings this out;
but as we drift on, the exotic grows tiresome and velvet-worn
and places like these, with their pollen clouds and pastel
rains and windy river basins, begin to fuel
our passage away from ourselves.

3.

Dusk, soft and pervasive, pearls a haze over the river.
That solitary horse in the far field is always the last to come in,
his black mane in the failing sun lit up red as iron,
as he rears slowly, pacifically, before the wind sweeps
over him cold and dry.
That first touch of blue, of ice, in the summer night
is nothing so much as the child's first comprehension of death.

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And for the children here, familiar with the butcher's
block
and the barnyard cycles,
the deaths of men, stripped of pomp and excess,
may bite but rarely poison.
All this uncluttered sky keeps death simple—
like a wolf allowed so many chickens before he is hunted
down.
The wolves, like wind and sun, must come and go
whether we fear or welcome them or lie in wait in the
high grass,
become wolves ourselves, rock-bellied and white-eyed.
Now that lone horse, nostrils quivering, smells the wolf
whose white eye expands into the moon rising up out of
the trees,
and he trots in finally across the fields and down to the
stable.
And the bats swim from their perches, and the owls
swoop,
and the frogs set up their din near the river.
And while the house fills with voices and footfalls
and laughter, and a fire crackles in the parlor,
we sit alone on the porch watching the ghost-play of the
moths,
for though we embraced this day dreaming fire and
measuring music,
we have gradually allowed the embracing darkness to hum
us beyond ourselves,
to the acknowledgment—difficult for a visitor after all—
that the dance is come to us, that in the complexity of so
much
bare horizon it is a congregation of dancers and singers
that simplifies things, reaffirming the simplicity of
men and women seasoned for birth and death each day of
their lives,
sweetened by pain and aching with pleasure,
and, like the stars, best seen in constellations.

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Patricia Storace

Still Life

Somehow, the two of us sit in a café
bordering the park. Its grass succumbs
again to chronic green, and I see,
obedient, what I don't want to see—
lacerating tulips, leaf-racked trees,
hear steps as gunshots on the street,
heel and pavement sniping at each other.
The corner of your mouth bleeds geography
in the form of Côtes du Rhône.
And the sunset is Cossack,
reddening the West with its pogrom.
I should be sipping the Riesling of an April evening,
the minutes sweet and disappearing on my palate,
mouth smoothing out, from time to time,
the folds of your neck's mortal velvet.
I should admire, not endure, the hyacinth, the campanelle
developing their color photographs of light.
But an hour not this one has stiffened
on the clock, and will not pass;
and eternity, twelve-armed goddess
revealed to me, appears in her aspect of hell.

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Ten Portraits

Josef Breitenbach

Josef Breitenbach, now 87, was born in Munich, and upon graduation from that city's university took up the family business as a wine merchant. His hobby was photography, and his business travels brought him many photographic subjects and the beginnings of an extensive collection of photographs, about which he wrote and lectured. In 1933, he left Hitler's Germany for Paris, and began to pursue his hobby professionally. Living on limited means which made it a struggle to support the requirements of even a simple darkroom, Breitenbach photographed many of the artists and writers who made their homes in Paris between the wars. In 1941, after a year's internment in a French refugee work camp, friends in England arranged Breitenbach's release and subsequent travel to the U.S. Breitenbach set up a commercial studio in New York, and continued to photograph those notables to whom chance and acquaintance led him.

As a technician, Breitenbach developed several specialized photographic methods, including a means to record on film the aromatic particles given off by plants and food. His portrait photography is notable for his reliance upon long exposures with a hand-held medium format camera, natural lighting, and low-contrast paper, which combine to produce his soft, deep-toned prints.

During the war, he was an instructor with Josef Albers at the experimental college in Black Mountain, N.C., and he has taught and lectured since the fifties in New York at Cooper Union and The New School. In the year of 1952–53 he was Chief of Photography for the U.N.'s Korean Reconstruction Agency, and is noted for his photographs of Asian life. His work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Library of Congress, and the Municipal Museum, Munich.

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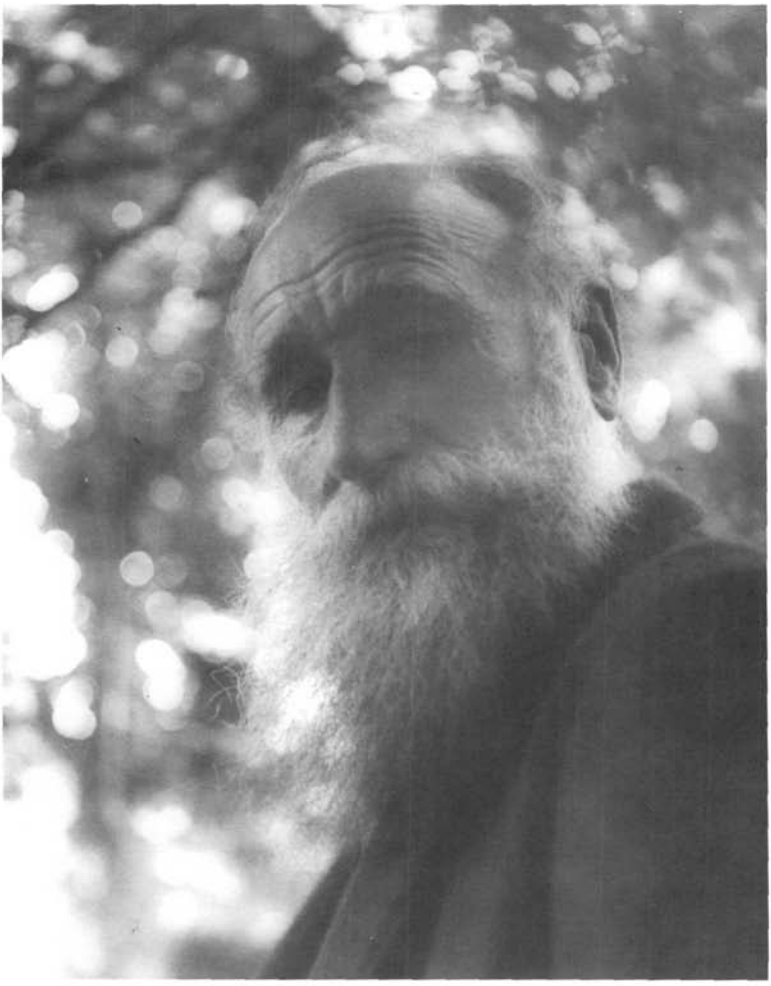

*B*rietenbach's early sittings in France were usually done as favors and his portfolio often served as his means of introduction to eminent subjects. In 1935, when Breitenbach travelled to Aristide Maillol's studio at Marly Le Roy, the sculptor initially refused to sit for a portrait, but after a careful viewing of the photographs he relented—"That's good work." Maillol suggested that Breitenbach refrain from close-ups: "Don't make my head so big." Breitenbach obeyed at first, but finished with a series of close-ups. When Maillol went through the proofs, the sculptor chose the "big heads."

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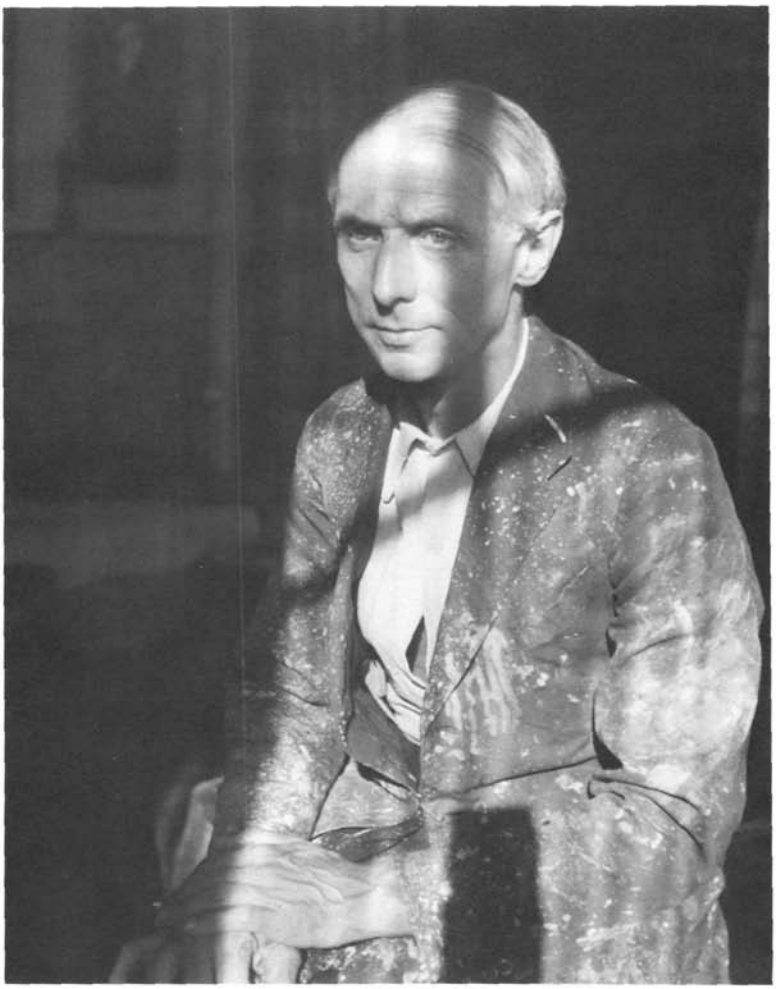

*B*reitenbach found Max Ernst to be flippant and cynical, but quite friendly. He photographed the painter in his Paris studio using a hand-held Rolliflex and natural light, trying to catch these aspects of the artist as he walked about the studio, contemplated its view of the railroad tracks below, sat down to talk with the photographer for a moment, then shifted position once more. When the shadow of the window frame fell upon the restless Ernst, Breitenbach had his portrait.

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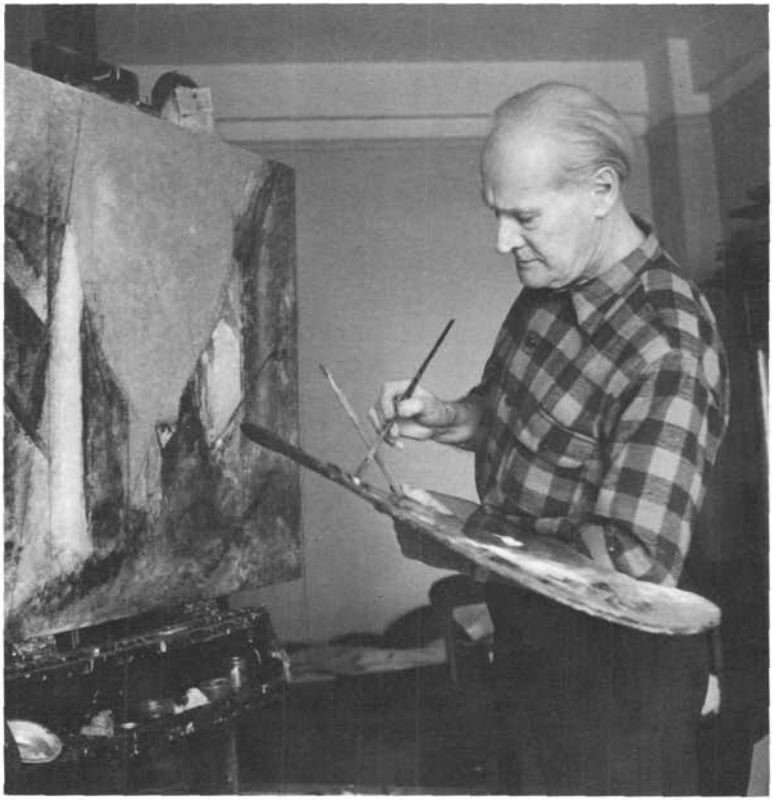

*L*yonel Feininger and Breitenbach patronized the same framer's shop in New York in 1943, and after the framer introduced the two men, Feininger asked to be photographed in his studio at home. Breitenbach captured the painter at work, and received as payment a small watercolor.

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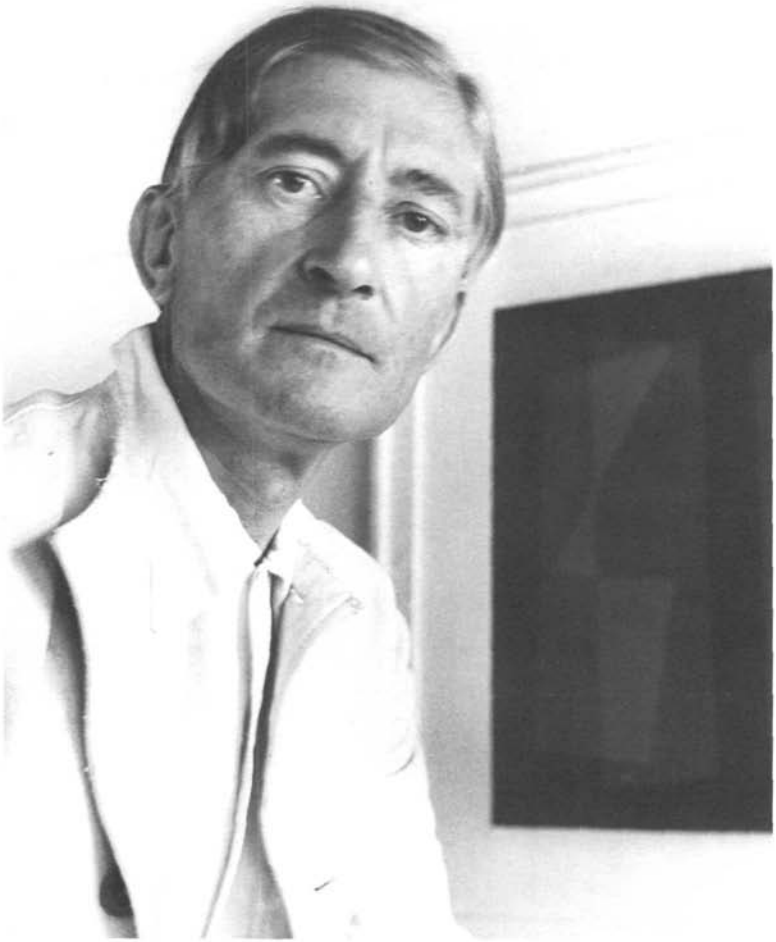

Josef Albers came to Breitenbach's studio on Central Park South during the Second World War to ask him to teach at the experimental college in Black Mountain, N.C. where Albers taught painting, printmaking and design. Breitenbach agreed to teach photography and recalls that Albers's natural authority made him a great asset to the school. This portrait was made during an informal session in Alber's apartment at the college.

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*B*reitenbach photographed James Joyce in the study of the latter's Paris home in 1937. The house contained only minor comforts; Joyce was simply installed among his books. Breitenbach remembers thinking that it was as though he had come home to his father's house in Munich, a feeling intensified by Joyce's quiet demeanor and talk of his family. Joyce's wife, Nora, watched as Breitenbach cranked his Rolliflex, while Joyce inquired after the photographer's work between shots.

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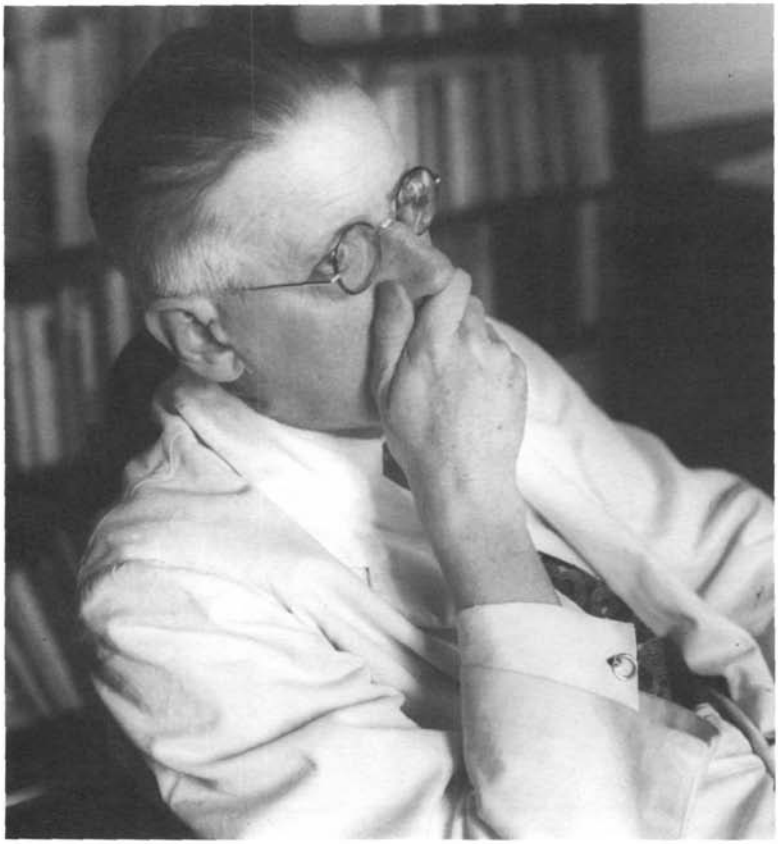

Towards the end of the session, Breitenbach asked Joyce if there were some special pose or gesture that he would wish recorded. Joyce thought for a moment, and raised his hand to his forehead. Then he let the hand pass over his eyes, covering them. When the hand cradled his nose and chin, Joyce indicated that this was the pose, and Breitenbach pressed the shutter.

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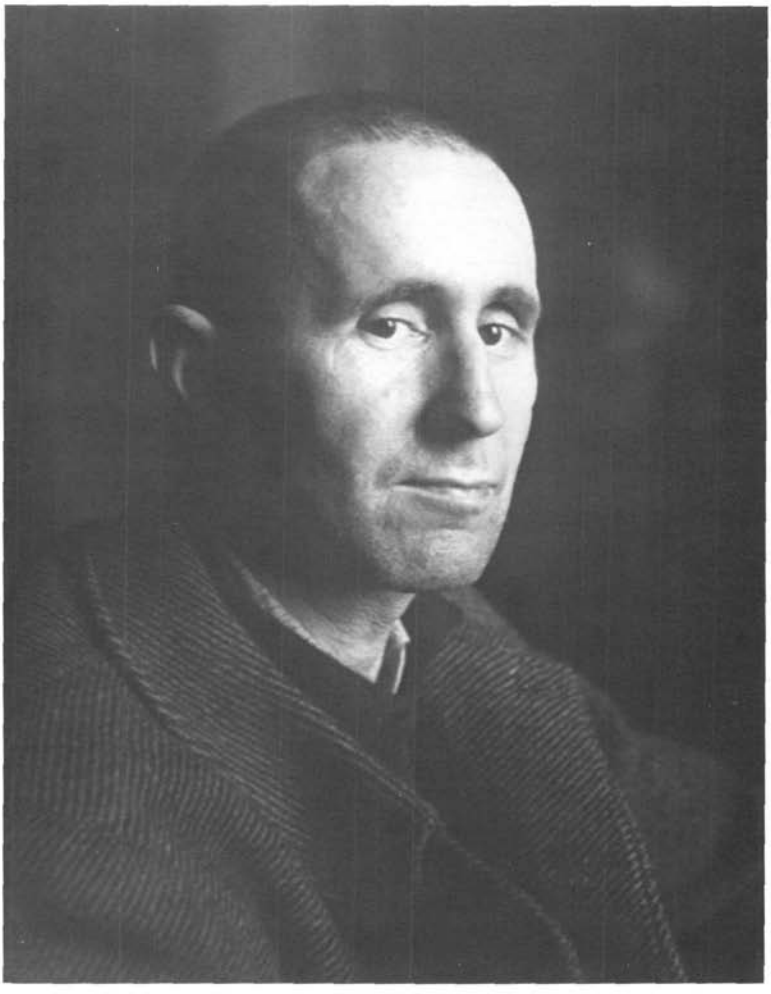

*B*reitenbach first photographed Bertolt Brecht in a patch of lamplight outside the Montparnasse theater where Brecht was directing an emigré production of *The Guns of Mother Carrar* in 1939. The candid portrait became perhaps the best known image of the playwright.

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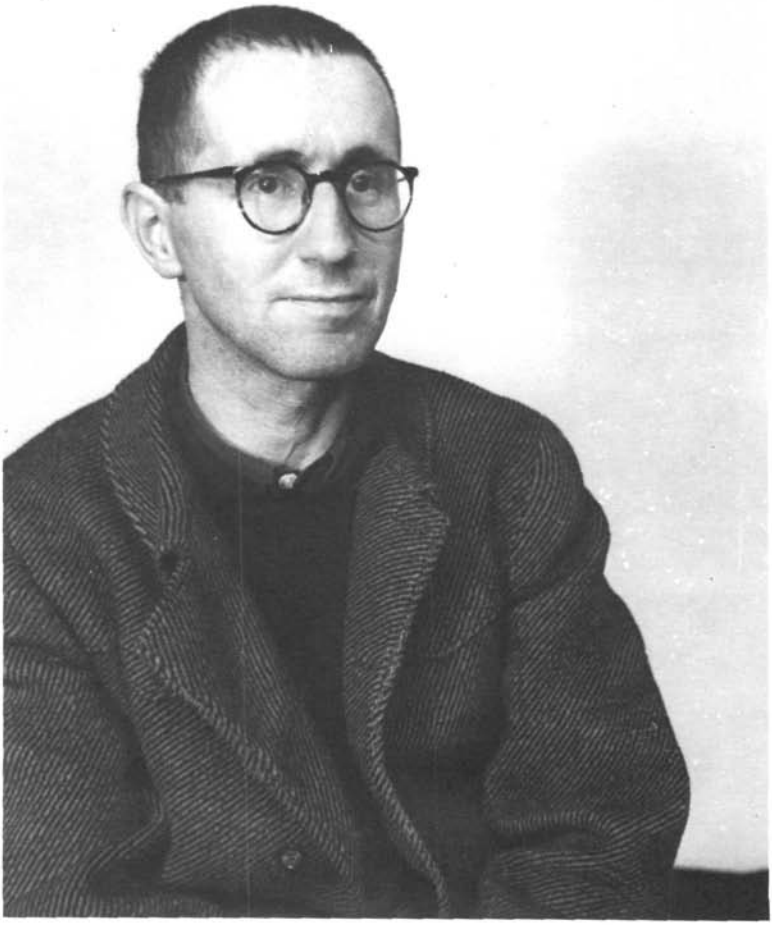

Brecht was impressed enough by Breitenbach's work to ask him to do a more formal study for the fly-leaf of Brecht's next book of plays. The work was done rapidly, but the portrait, lighter in mood than the first, pleased Brecht very much.

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*E*mile Bernard was introduced to Breitenbach by a mutual friend a week before the outbreak of war in 1939. Bernard had been a pupil with Toulouse-Lautrec at Fernand Corman's studio where they studied the academic style of the day. But when he was discovered painting a nude in emerald and vermillion, he was dismissed and his father burned his palette. Bernard moved to Brittany, and met Gauguin whose work owes much to Bernard's ideas. Bernard became a close friend and student of Cézanne's at the turn of the century, though his painting continued to center on a revival of Classicism. As Bernard distinguished himself as a critic and theoretician, he was elected to the ranks of the Academy, which had formerly condemned his experimental work. At the time of the sitting, Breitenbach sensed that he had the chance to record a link with the great talents of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. For the portrait, Bernard wore the clothes in which he usually worked, and Breitenbach sought to capture this elegance just short of dandyism by using long exposures. Using natural light, Breitenbach worked amid the many framed examples of Bernard's art that adorned the painter's Paris studio. Bernard was pleased by Breitenbach's methods, and returned the favor with the presentation of the *carte d'entrée* reproduced below the portrait.

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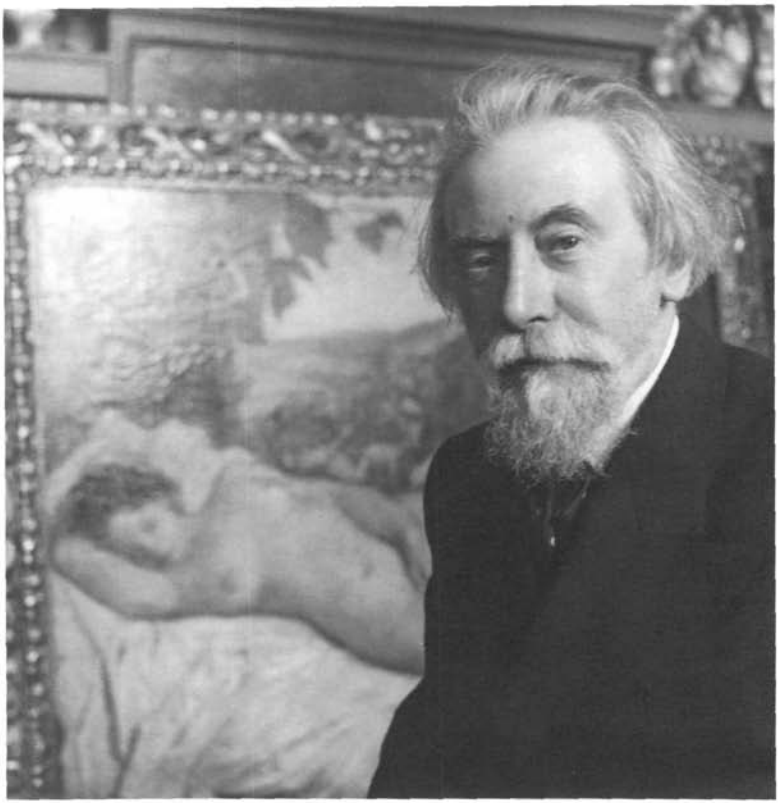

Emile Bernard

Artiste Peintre

Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur et de l'Ordre du Nichan

Demande à Mme Bernheim
de permettre à Mr Breitenbach
de photographier son grand
tableau du Bois d'Amour
avec des remerciements. E. B.

15, Quai Bourbon

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*J*ohn Steinbeck's house on the upper East Side of New York was sparsely decorated—Breitenbach remembers only a painting of the writer's wife and child—when the photographer visited him there in the early forties. He remembers being welcomed most cordially, but with an apology from Steinbeck that he must finish doing his laundry before the session might begin. Breitenbach, newly arrived in the U.S., had never before seen a washing machine, so Steinbeck invited him to the laundry room to see how such a thing worked. Steinbeck was followed everywhere by a pet that Breitenbach found appropriate to the writer's simple and friendly presence: a large, scruffy sheepdog.

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Marvin Bell

Felt But Not Touched
—Seattle

That light behind the Olympics at supper hour—
it takes a sky of clouds from here to there
to spot the sun, seam and snow just right.
That pulsating light, a sizable incandescence
out of the grayness—that's the wing or tail of a plane.
The roundness of things—that's knowledge, a new way
to touch it here. (On the plains, we see Earth curve,
and I have seen the sun melt into the ocean elsewhere
and then call a color or two it left behind down.)

Then it is dark. The great streak of sunlight
that showed our side of snowy peaks has gone ahead.
Those bumps on the holly tree we passed
getting home for the late afternoon view from upstairs—
next to them, some smaller trees and a porch,
and next to that the streaky windows and then
the whole household getting ready to make the break
into spring—and sometimes in late winter we can't
sit still for connecting time at both ends.

If anything we do or don't will keep the world
for others, it will need such distant knowledge—beyond
experience, provable by ones, felt but not touched.
As we watch the light in the distance move on and
around,
and the air at mountain height take up the cause of snow,
all that is beneath us that is not light has stopped.

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Two Poems by Paul Zweig

Parting The Sea

Fog hides the shallow ditch, no more
Than a grassy furrow, marking the edge of our land.
Oak trees and thorned acacia bend over it,
Like combers of a green sea.
The thinning out begins on this side,
Where there is barley, tobacco,
Green peas climbing on a spindly branch.
So much naming is not natural.
It must be cared for, thinned
And watered every day.
Listen!
The cruelty of trees, burst rivers
Of oak and fern, lap crazily around it.

To farm you need a sharp edge,
Something that doesn't know you're there;
You need to give up owning
This patch-sized farm on the earth's outer rim.

Remember the human body was trimmed
From something bigger and worse:
Identity sobs in the branches of trees,
Shouts from the stubble of the mown fields.
Either you have no enemies, or only enemies.

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The Dance of Death

What is it when your shirts, pants, and faded pyjamas jiggle on the clothesline outside your window, somewhere between a chorus line and a dance of death; and you, glazed with boredom or sleep, slip outside and start dancing too: that striped shirt at the end, flopping at the elbows, until it feels as if someone had pulled a plug, and all the movement in the world was funneling through you.

Did I say a dance of death? I'm thinking of a time when death wasn't as private as it is now; when it was something that people did together, not coffined up in hospitals or in people's minds, as the last bad luck. When everyone's feet walked on death, no matter how high their heads were, going all the while across fields, nimble and giddy, in a line that didn't end: the banker and the beggar weak with laughter, the lady's hair showering on the fingers of her partner, the ghost:

Not grotesque as in a Bergman movie, but compassionate as midnight, or as the richly apparelled figures in the famous dance adorning the church choir at Chaise-Dieu, in Auvergne, dancing to the accompaniment of plague, bandits and war. Death stirs under their feet, and the musicians wearing cocked hats in a corner, playing the shepherd's flute and something that looks like a fiddle, pluck death in broad stringy sweeps which you seem to hear as you circle the ambulatory.

Your feet trip in the limestone quiet, your arms want to swing out. There's a feeling in your throat, as if you were about to laugh, but you hold back, so as not to interrupt. Because whatever is shared isn't death at all.

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John Koethe

One Light

Later we began to learn to live
At the mouth of this well of the pure desire
For an end of wanting, the descent into the sun.
The days unfurled like flags across the sky
Of cerulean blue, but the dreams were blank,
The evenings vague and apprehensive.
One by one the small songs twinkled away
Until only the sky music occupied our minds
With its stunned lament, and the brown eyes
Lowered finally and started to fill with tears.
We had been thrown into the middle of a landscape
Of an earlier imagination, an older dispensation
Swarming with wraiths and threats of immortality
Delivered in plainsong, with a grim air of purpose
Surrounding each detail of our preparations to depart.
It was the country we grew up in,
The scene of our nostalgias, where the warm
Twilight penetrated to the bone and the soft sea
Swept up towards an ambiguous horizon.
Then we moved into a world of towers and trees
Burnished by the autumn sunlight, grey stone paths
That emerged from the floating snow of winter
And spring rioting everywhere, that seemed
Torn from that book of dreams we kept rereading
In the aftermath of fear and disappointment.
The words leapt from the page into the mind
And vanished there, lost in the translation
Of forgotten things into the objects of a wish,

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But meanwhile the formal part went on: the candles lit,
The folded napkins stiff with possibility.
And finally the distracted singing started
That grew up gradually into another life
Behind the strange one in the mirror, casting back
Into an imaginary past for what the others knew
Only to throw away, and thrusting us in ignorance
Into this endless now of restlessness and speculation
With the sky sealed tight, the tired mind withdrawn
Into a fable of itself and all the magic afternoons
Reduced to a single image of golden sunlight
Wavering over the soft grass. We have gotten older,
And the cave we started out from has become our home.

I know that today is everything
And change is an illusion fostered by
The loss of what we are, of our collective past.
The myth of how we came here, each one following
The course of some peculiar purpose written in the sky
Or held in the static frieze of time—I know that
That self-dramatization is delusion, empty cant
Hiding the shapeless breath that sings for nothing
But the singing itself, the mortal breath that cries into
The echo of the half-remembered cry that is its own.
But that is what time feels like from inside
Where the story of our common life unfolds in a darkness
That is taken from it at the end, torn into fragments
And blown like bright clouds of confetti across the sky.
It is the culmination of the dark dream of progress
That begins in wanting and finishes in a quiet
    conversation
Held at the mouth of a grave, our grave, that trembles now
    at the approach
Of the blazing void that widens as we fall out of the
    darkness
Into a deep field of light, back into endlessness.

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Judith Baumel

Proper Distance and Proper Time

Two events have a spacelike separation.
Show that a frame can be found in which
the two events occur at the same time.

All summer he taught relativity
and knew their first time around
they wouldn't understand it
—that intuition of the weight of numbers.
Nothing visual helped:
Explosions on trains.
Twins separated and aging differently.
The pole vaulter running through a barn
so fast the pole shrinks by half
to the size of the barn.
He looked always to one student's squint
and tightened lip, for her form bent
over gas tubes in lab.

At the end they all drove out
to a field to watch the mid-August
meteor shower. He lay next to her
under a college blanket
separate but so close he imagined
the pressure of her knee
through blue jeans melting him.
Then they slept. Her knee as she curled
brushed him and he woke
absolutely still till she shifted away.
In the morning he told her
she was beautiful.
She considered Einstein's paradox.

If I hold a mirror in front of myself
arm's length away
and run at nearly the speed of light
will I be able to see myself?

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Three Poems by Baron Wormser

Good Trembling

"Good trembling," CJ said as we
Walked along the docksides in our thin jackets
Even though it was winter on the East Coast.
We were advertising our urge for life
To ourselves and anyone else who might
Have noticed. It wasn't likely, but we liked
To believe that our minds had lights,
That we were intellectual Tom Swifts
And pureblooded peasants of the finer and
Tumultuous emotions. A little era babbled through us.
"I don't want to become an anecdote,"
I said as I waved my arms at the thought
Of eternity—say being thirty and married.
A cop car slowed down beside us. Long hair.
"I can't imagine that," CJ said.
"It's too cold and windy." We looked straight ahead,
But the car drove off anyway;
It was warm in there for them. We got some coffee,
Exchanged barrages of quotations,
Vowed to rectify the inertia of everyone else,
And went out again into that clenched wind
Of portents, dogmas, and seasonable love.

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The Oxymoron as Taoist Vision

I do not call something "wisdom"
When I can predict the next verity.
Accommodation is wearisome.
When men rehearse the consequences
Of their passions, they call it "logic."
I do not want to act as though
I know what everyone else knows.
Because we use the same words
Does not mean we have the same eyes.
A bird flew through the village this morning.
People said it was a finch, a jay, a cardinal.
One old man swore it was a magpie.
Good for all of them!
The bird goes its way and the people have
Something to talk about.
I like surprises, minglings, distances, leaps.
Magic is inveterate.
I look at my cigarette smoke.
I like to hear what you have to say
Because it is you who are saying it.
Some child is laughing at a bowl of cereal.
If you are skillful enough,
Everything may become incongruous.
Even the "progress" everyone talks about
Will start to sing and smirk and after awhile
Make certain admissions.
I clap my hands
And they sound like mountains dancing.

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Essay: The Hudson River School

You see it especially in the paintings of
The mid-nineteenth century—that serene, beckoning
distance
As if they could not look too closely at what was near
Preferring instead that vista of promise
For which they became famous.
It wasn't, to be sure, those clichéd, too-contented
Objects of pastoral nor those
Mechanical obeisances to Poussin and Claude
That made the reviewers boast and declaim.
It was as the acolytes of natural sentiment
And limners of a momentous terrain that these painters
Were plausibly American.
Still there are,
Even amid patriotism, certain qualities
One must take into account. Although, for instance,
The figures in their pictures are often dwarf-small,
They do not seem humbled. They labor intently,
Or they gaze and take the measure of that misty
Enormity spread out before them. The mind has a scale
Of its own, and this must be a country of enterprising
Citizens. Politics, for once, will have eyes.
In the middle ground there are a series of perfect planes
Whose grandeur is orderly:
A range of mountains sits like deacons;
A lake lies limp as a cloth.
Each tree is the image of a tree.
We behold the forest of an actual, Edenic patrimony.
We cannot live there and wouldn't want to
But cherish it as a moral charm.
Then there is that distance which although aerial
Avoids heaven. Sensation is uncertain,
But what's faraway comforts and murmurs
And gently speculates. Remoteness means no harm,
And these are the landscapes of a thorough mercy,
A sublime but imaginable grace.

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Two Stories by William Ferguson

Morrissey

There was a pianist living across the street from us this past summer who used to play the same Schubert sonata that's on your record, the posthumous B-flat major. I think he may have had the same recording, or one very much like it; sometimes you'd hear him stop practicing and then after a minute the same music would start up again, but this time with a quality of, how shall I say, of great goodness, which makes me think it may have been the Rubinstein you have there in your hand. Don't ask me what I mean by great goodness, because I don't know, and even repeating the words this one time they begin to sound sentimental, and that's not the point. It was just a quality that was lacking in Morrissey's playing, and since his technique was excellent, and his heart seemed to be in it, so that short passages could take your breath away, it's very difficult to say what this lack consisted of entirely. (That's an odd turn of phrase, isn't it—the idea that a lack could consist of something.) I think it may have been his handling of tempo. He had the bad habit of rushing certain passages, in

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a way typical of students who've reached an advanced level of competence without ever realizing that eventually they must be not only very competent but very good. And there we are again at that word. People say "good musician" when what they mean is "competent." Morrissey was extremely competent; Rubinstein is extremely good. The difference is everything; it's the difference between real music and—well, what we ordinarily have to put up with.

Morrissey had a musicologist friend at Harvard—Robert Weston, I think his name was—who once used a computer to measure the accuracy of several great pianists. Rubinstein finished last, of course, in close competition with Serkin; at the top of the list was the icy Glenn Gould. (In defense of Professor Weston it should be noted that although he did publish the results of his experiment, the conclusion he drew was one that any concert-goer would quickly agree with, namely that the degree of technical accuracy in pianists of a certain rank is not particularly significant.) When Morrissey told me all this I said I was surprised that his friend hadn't gone a little further and hypothesized that really good music-making is always marked by obvious technical flaws, and that perhaps they were there by some sort of design, in the same way the Indians of Panama are careful to avoid perfect symmetries in the patterns of their textiles (I used some such fatuous comparison); after all, the two pianists who supposedly had the most trouble with technique were precisely the most graceful ones, the ones who took your breath away in concert. It seems that Morrissey had made some such observation to Weston, but in more intelligent terms than mine (I admit now that no sane pianist would ever deliberately sabotage his own execution); and he asked what exactly had been measured by the computer in regard to tempo? Percentage of notes played at precisely the right moment, composer-indicated *ritardandi*, *fermate* and so on excepted, said Weston, not without misery. Morrissey: then if the pianist respects the indicated tempo overall in a given passage, but the individual notes have as it were an organic rather than a mechanical relationship to the larger scheme, his marks will still be

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low? Not really, said Weston, or just low according to my wretched system; anyway, what do you understand by *organic* and *mechanical*? Maybe those aren't the best words for it, said Morrissey, but surely you'll agree that a given handling of tempo might satisfy my organic ear—influenced as it is by fluctuating natural rhythms—at the same time your computer's mechanical ear is rejecting it? The public is human, after all, not mechanical. The columns of the Parthenon swell at the center to satisfy the human eye; they were not shaped to please a republic of measuring-sticks. (My comparison had not been the only fatuous one, it seems; it was obvious that Morrissey had not yet read Kamienski on the *rubato*.) I've forgotten how the professor is supposed to have responded to this, but the discussion was superfluous in any case; Weston's private view was that his own research was worthless, except perhaps as a warning to younger scholars.

* * *

The sound of a piano is very penetrating, unavoidable, you might say, but at the same time it seems to us to be one of the most tolerable of instruments, at the other end of the spectrum from (say) the violin-playing of our upstairs tenant, whom we're trying to evict, by the way. So we didn't mind Morrissey particularly, even when we were trying to work and he was playing, even when (as I say) he would vary the tempo so rashly in the first movement of the Schubert. When I think about it more carefully I realize that it did bother me in principle, but that I forgave him very early and forever for all such transgressions, so that they became as it were inaudible. I remember the first day I heard him play; it was a very warm evening, surprisingly so for the beginning of June, and our block was taking on some of the qualities of a real neighborhood—children crying on balconies, dogs being walked, hibachi smoke drifting pleasantly among the old frame houses. I began to hear the Schubert; it seemed to be coming through an open window across the street. The first melody was well played, strong and brave, but then as it appeared to

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fail—I mean after the first statement, when a development should begin but does not really begin—the unseen pianist started to rush, as if he had lost his bearings and was being carried helplessly forward by a river without a name; there were excitements as always, but of the adolescent kind—the quick green orgasms of the very young, so to speak, which are only tolerable against the promise of a long, and unproven, life of real sensuality. Now he slowed as if realizing his mistake, but it was as if he could no longer imagine the original tempo. I crossed the street on the pretext of mailing a letter; now I heard a metronome ticking, like Japanese bones in the wind; now nothing at all; and now the sweeter, surer notes of a musician of great goodness. I found myself imagining an eighteen-year-old, a twenty-year-old at most, behind the shade in desperate frustration, on the bench, listening once again to the inimitable notes of the master. As I passed the house the shade was suddenly lifted, the window opened wider, and I saw the pianist leaning out, as if inside he hadn't been able to breathe.

I stared at him in surprise: the man was over forty. His face was curiously soft, even in the tension of the moment; he opened his mouth unnecessarily wide, as if the need for great draughts of air had been accompanied by a compulsion to somehow dramatize his anger, at least to himself; or it may have been a genuine anxiety attack of the type I was to see him suffer later in the summer, when we had become friends. In those frightful episodes his heart would suddenly begin to race and literally drive him out of his chair; the automatic dilation of his lungs seemed to have stopped, so that he had to struggle for every breath; blushing scarlet, gasping, panicky, he lurched and reeled from corner to corner and throughout the house, appealing to us for help that we could not possibly give, because we knew that physically there was nothing wrong. The attack would pass after an hour or so, which usually included a walk around the block, Morrissey tottering terrified between us, wanting to run away, as we held tight on either side and kept up a steady rhythm of talk to see if we could somehow bring him back to normal.

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And before long he would be fine. After a day or two there would be shamefaced apologies and effusive thanks. But how exhausting it was!—physically, I mean. The curious thing is that we never had any strong emotional reaction to Morrissey's bad times, as you would have expected, given their violent character. We couldn't help wondering about the rest of his life and the bearing it might have on the problem, and so we asked him in detail about his family and friends, his childhood in Minnesota, his ex-wife, about the silent side of the musician, so to speak. Most of the time, even when he was perfectly calm, Morrissey was not very open on these subjects, except insofar as they had to do with a favorite maxim, namely that the most important thing in life is not to repeat yourself. He did not put it quite so simply; he would say "not to repeat your mistakes," but it was clear to us that he had very little idea what he meant by a mistake; his relationship with his father had certainly been disastrous, but to say that one or the other of the parties had been in error would have been impossible, to judge from what he told us; yet the unhappiness of the memory had prevented him from forming any close relationships with the kind of surrogate fathers we all seem to find in uncles, teachers, elder colleagues, and so on. It was the same with his marriage, which had lasted barely a year (when he was nineteen!); he would begin to sound knowledgeable and world-weary as he described his months of married life, but we couldn't for the life of us connect his self-evident truths to any experience of ours, or anything else we'd ever heard of. After a while we began to understand what his principle of non-repetition really meant—and it was not that he claimed to have understood his mistakes and was determined not to have them happen again; no, by refusing to "repeat" he simply wanted to avoid giving people the impression that he was incapable of growth and change. It was on this monstrous triple negative, this social sham, that his life was built. It goes without saying that his terror of repetition itself constituted a pattern, and a particularly rigid one, a system of avoidances; but he didn't see it that way; he seemed to think of life as something that by definition hap-

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pened elsewhere, from which his own rhythm of activity was somehow exempt. He had such energy, such emotion, and they should have joined into miraculous shapes and instead they were like smoke whirling in the void. I don't mean to be hard on poor Morrissey; I'm only trying to tell the truth. I think there would have been much more sympathy from us if he had seemed more real, or more believable, but in fact there was always a sheen of irreality about him, even in the thick of a mental crisis; so that even though we were doing our best to cope with a difficult situation, we did not seem to be more than superficially moved by it.

What I've said is not quite right; almost, but not quite. Let me see whether I can explain. I was talking about the first time I heard Morrissey play, when I saw him leaning out the window. The shock was not only that he was middle-aged, although that did surprise me, since from his playing I had thought of him as twenty or twenty-five at the most; it was the face that shocked me. Have you ever seen those strange adolescents—say from age fifteen on—who should be beautiful in promise but who instead give the impression of being permanently unrealized? Adults are always depressed at the sight of them, because every conceivable element of beauty is present except grace, and in the absence of grace, which I suppose is the genius for living and moving in time, it suddenly becomes apparent that nothing else matters. Morrissey's face was like that, but much older; it was perfect, everything admirable seemed to be combined in those features, and so there was no possible way to deny that his face was beautiful, except for the bald statement that it was not. Not that it was ugly; rather unreal, like a frozen child's. When I first saw it, I immediately forgave this stranger for all his inabilities—his failure to keep to any rhythm, organic or otherwise, to bring some kind of reasonable order to those long landscapes of the Viennese, to comprehend and administer time and hold it safely in his hands; I forgave him for all this and more, I mean to say that I gave him up for dead.

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Dies Irae

Sunday, July 11th.

My wife says it would be nice to win the lottery because then we could pay off the second mortgage, and I tell her that the odds she's counting on for that are the same ones that make it unlikely that she'll be incinerated by a meteor on the way to work or even get hit by a bus or fall on the third rail and get fricasseed, all of which is perfectly possible, but statistics say it's unlikely so why doesn't she just relax. She doesn't seem to be very impressed with this line of reasoning; she says she's never really been bothered by the thought of being squashed or charbroiled or something just exactly because it is so unlikely, though why I have to put it in those lurid terms she doesn't know, and she still wants to win the lottery because she sees no reason at all why she shouldn't be struck by the good lightning and spared by the bad. Maybe I didn't explain myself very well. To me it's extremely important—knowing about those odds, I mean—and it's no exaggeration to say that I've been depending on them all my life, and not

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just for staying alive in the sense that I avoid accidents, but also as a kind of nourishing jungle of numbers, a saving miscellany. To set about winning money would be to endanger the balance of probabilities, in the same way that building a road through the Amazonian basin (for instance) can have disastrous effects on the delicate layer of jungle topsoil on which the entire ecosystem depends. We saw dramatic evidence of this when we were in Brazil last year, by the way, about 200 kilometers from the beginning of the Trans-Amazon Highway proper, at the little trading town of Hubris; the entire area from the road out has been leached away and blown to kingdom come, along with every palm tree, liana, monkey and snapping turtle in the region; now it's a wasteland, and all because of the road, because somebody wanted to get from here to there without tears.

Monday, July 12th.

It would have been fantastically improbable for someone to come up to me when I was twenty-one (say) and baldly put the question of what I had done with my life up to then (not that no one ever asked the question when I was that age; they did, repeatedly, but obviously no one ever meant it; they just couldn't have). The question *would have made sense* at twenty-one, I want to make that clear—that's why I always felt a shudder when anyone went through the motions of asking it ("What have you been doing with yourself?" etc.), because I knew there might be about one chance in a million it was meant, and then what would I do? But no one could possibly live with that kind of fear for long, you simply have to discount certain things; and as I say, I relied on the laws of chance to make me at least tolerably anonymous, if not really invisible.

Unfortunately the longer you live the more likely it gets that someone, sometime, will look you up and down with a truly objective eye and make a judgment. We may feel with every decade that passes that the odds of this happening have gone from one in a million to one in a hundred thousand or one in ten thousand, but the fact is that we have no idea, it

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might be one in ten or one in three; human beings are not dominoes or dice, after all. Maybe that's why I'm so nervous today, and I really am, I have to admit it. Do you know what it's like to intuit that the day of judgment is not far off—in the same way you might have a special feeling about a numbers slip—?, that it might come today, this very morning, in the slow rain, as you walk to perform errands whose importance you only vaguely grasp, a day when the simplest tasks seem impossible, surely no day to defend the indefensible, and not outside, not in this weather;—if someone were to suddenly pick you out of the enormous circle of her acquaintances, mostly famous, and isolate you horribly in her mind so you were no longer diluted among the faces somewhat like yours, the similar careers, and *judge—then*—without a word, without even being there to see you as you trudge stupidly through puddles to an unremembered goal; and don't think you can go on living as you have up to now, the whole world has changed for you with this intuitive knowledge that you have been silently, absently dismissed forever by a person whose face you can hardly recall, the diminutive rain is suddenly a bath of darkness in the sullen street, as all shapes become shouting sharp—the outlines you always thought were an artistic convention, the limits—my God!—where the brick building simply rises into the smog and ends, where the shape of a car is final, where the sound of each footstep echoes just exactly once on the opposing façade, so that if you weren't careful you might miss it entirely.

How much better it is—even if more foolish in the end—to face the judge directly, this casually bitter person with the fine features and the whinnying laugh, who believes herself to be happy—how much better to hear her say: "and what do you consider yourself to be, really?"; to enumerate, with choking bravado, accomplishments, honors, obsessions, only to hear her interrupt (with an impatience only a sensitive ear could ever detect): "but what does it all add up to, what is the central thing?" My friend, wake up to reality, this person no longer exists, she must be dead by now, or else she's living in some distant city; she probably never thinks of you at all,

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or in any case you will certainly never come face to face with her idiotic opinions; but even if you were to hear this fantasy played out in the living air it would have to be the last time anyone ever judged you to your face, or at all—because one does not have to judge people beyond a certain age; if they didn't know the answers at thirty they will certainly not know them at forty or fifty.

Tuesday 13th.

Raquel has just won the lottery. It's a small amount compared to the grand prize, but large enough to pay off the second mortgage and have quite a bit left over. The strange thing is that she had no premonition of success, and she's famous for the accuracy of her premonitions. I'm glad but terrified at the same time, I mean I'm afraid of our winnings because they seem to hint at a breakdown in other areas; I feel naked, alone, as if everyone had abandoned us; I know for instance that hundreds of poets, painters, printers and professors have already gone trooping off to cities whose names I can never quite remember, except that they're all somewhere in the west or the midwest; and here I am at 35, just halfway home, and I have been silently judged, I know it!—and not by the one-in-several-millions whose face I hate, but *by the millions themselves*, acting all together as a single refractory, vindictive mind which did not have to see me or know me to judge me: for that purpose, statistics were enough.

I've decided to ask Raquel for the extra winnings to start a new career for myself. I don't know what, not yet; but we just have to get out of Boston, I can't stand this weather; every raindrop is like a tiny, sullen mirror, and I must see my face reflected a thousand times a day. It looks so pale and prismatic, so unspeakably small.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

William Ferguson teaches Spanish Literature at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. His book of short stories, *Freedom and Other Fictions*, will be published in the spring of 1984 by Alfred A. Knopf.
James Fetler is the author of *Impossible Appetites*, which won the Iowa Short Fiction Award and also the Gold Medal for Fiction from the Commonwealth Club of California. He's just completed a novel. He teaches American Literature at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California.
Eugene Garber directs the Graduate Program in English at the State University of New York in Albany. His collection entitled *Metaphysical Tales* (University of Missouri Press) won the 1981 Associated Writing Programs Short Fiction Award.
Joy Williams is the author of *State of Grace* and *Taking Care*. This is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress, as is "Making Friends" which appeared in issue #82.

POETRY

John Ashbery is the subject of one of this issue's interviews. His new book, *A Wave*, will be published by Viking in May.
Judith Baumel lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.
Marvin Bell teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. A new collection of his poems will be published by Atheneum in 1984.
George Bradley lives in Sagaponack, New York.
Nicholas Christopher, whose first book of poems, *On Tour with Rita*, was published by Knopf in 1982, is also writing fiction. He lives in New York.
Jonathan Cott's most recent book is *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn: The Wisdom of Children's Literature*. He lives in New York.

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Tess Gallagher teaches at Syracuse University. Her new book of poems, *Willingly*, will be published this spring by Graywolf Press.
James Baker Hall, whose fiction has also appeared in *The Paris Review*, lives in Sadieville, Kentucky.
John Koethe's second book of poems, *The Late Wisconsin Spring*, will be published next year by Princeton. He teaches philosophy at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
Mark Rudman has just published a study of Robert Lowell in the Columbia Writers' Series. His book-length poem, *By Contraries*, from which the work printed here is taken, is awaiting publication.
Barry Spacks's most recent book, *Spacks Street: New and Selected Poems* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), has been nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Patricia Storace's work has recently appeared in *The Michigan Quarterly* and in *The Arvon Anthology*, edited by Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney. She is currently on the staff of the *New York Review of Books* in New York.
Gerald Stern's new book, *Paradise Poems*, will be published by Random House in the fall of 1984. He now teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.
Baron Wormser's first book of poems, *The White Words*, was recently published by Houghton Mifflin. He works as a librarian in Norridgewock, Maine.
Charles Wright was co-winner of the 1983 American Book Award in poetry for *Country Music: Selected Early Poems* (Wesleyan). Random House will publish *The Other Side of the River* this spring. He has recently been translating the poetry of Dino Campana.
Paul Zweig's long-awaited book on Whitman is soon to be published by Oxford. He has also recently completed a new collection of poems.

INTERVIEWS

Peter Stitt is the author of the forthcoming *The World's Hieroglyphic Beauty: Essays on and Interviews with Five Contemporary Poets*. He writes regularly for *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry*, and teaches at the University of Houston. He is also the authorized biographer of James Wright.
Richard Ziegfeld is the author of Part I of the James Laughlin interview which appeared in the last issue of *The Paris Review*. He works for McDonnell Douglas Corporation as communications director and editor on a computer-assisted instruction courseware development project. He is also editor of the "New Entries" portion of *The Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook*.

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ART

Ken Goodman was born in 1950 and lives in New York. His paintings and drawings have been exhibited at the Hayden Gallery, M.I.T., Cambridge, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, and Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York.

Roberto Juarez was born in Chicago in 1952, and lives in New York. His work has been included in exhibitions at the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York, Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, and a recent one-man exhibition at Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Kenny Scharf was born in Los Angeles in 1958, and lives in New York. Recent one-man exhibitions of his paintings, sculpture, and installations have been held at the Fun Gallery, New York, and Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York.

FEATURE

Andrew Ludwig, who wrote the captions for the Josef Breitenbach portfolio, is an undergraduate at Brown University.

ERRATUM:

The Paris Review acknowledges the contribution of Lewis Buzbee to the Raymond Carver interview which appeared in the Summer issue #88. Mr. Buzbee's name will appear as co-author with Mona Simpson's in future reprints of that interview.

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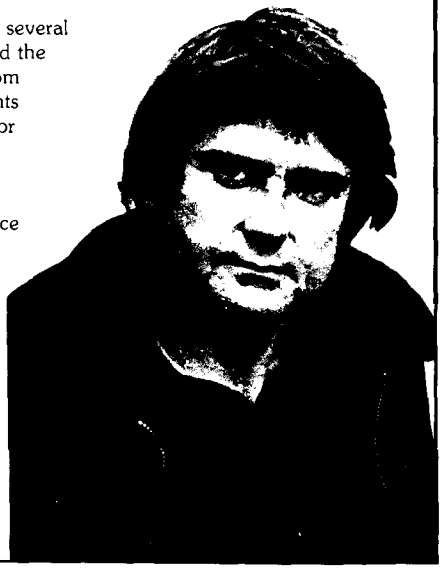

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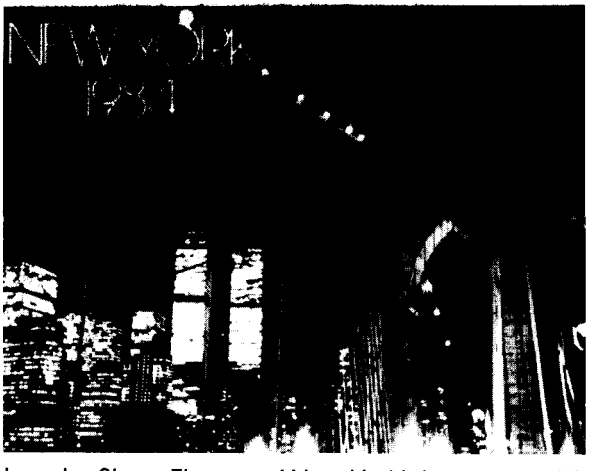

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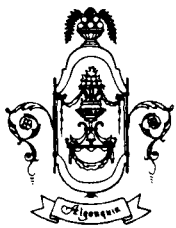

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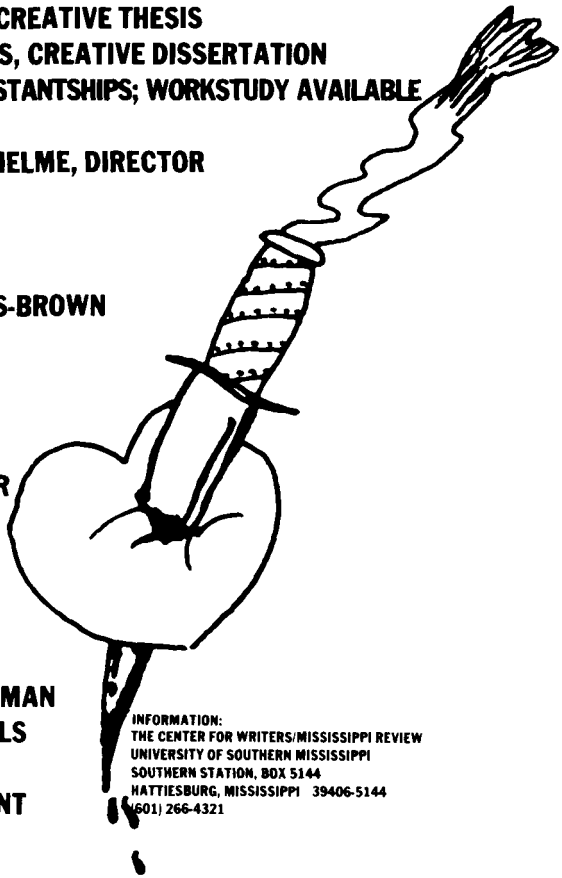

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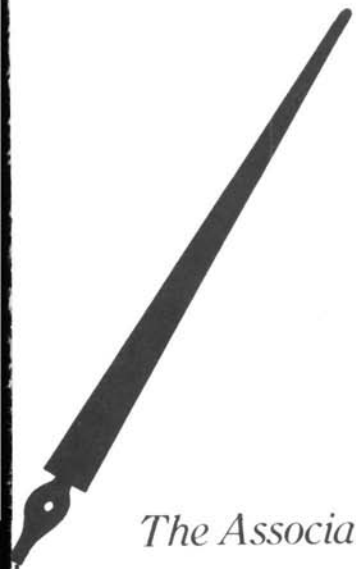

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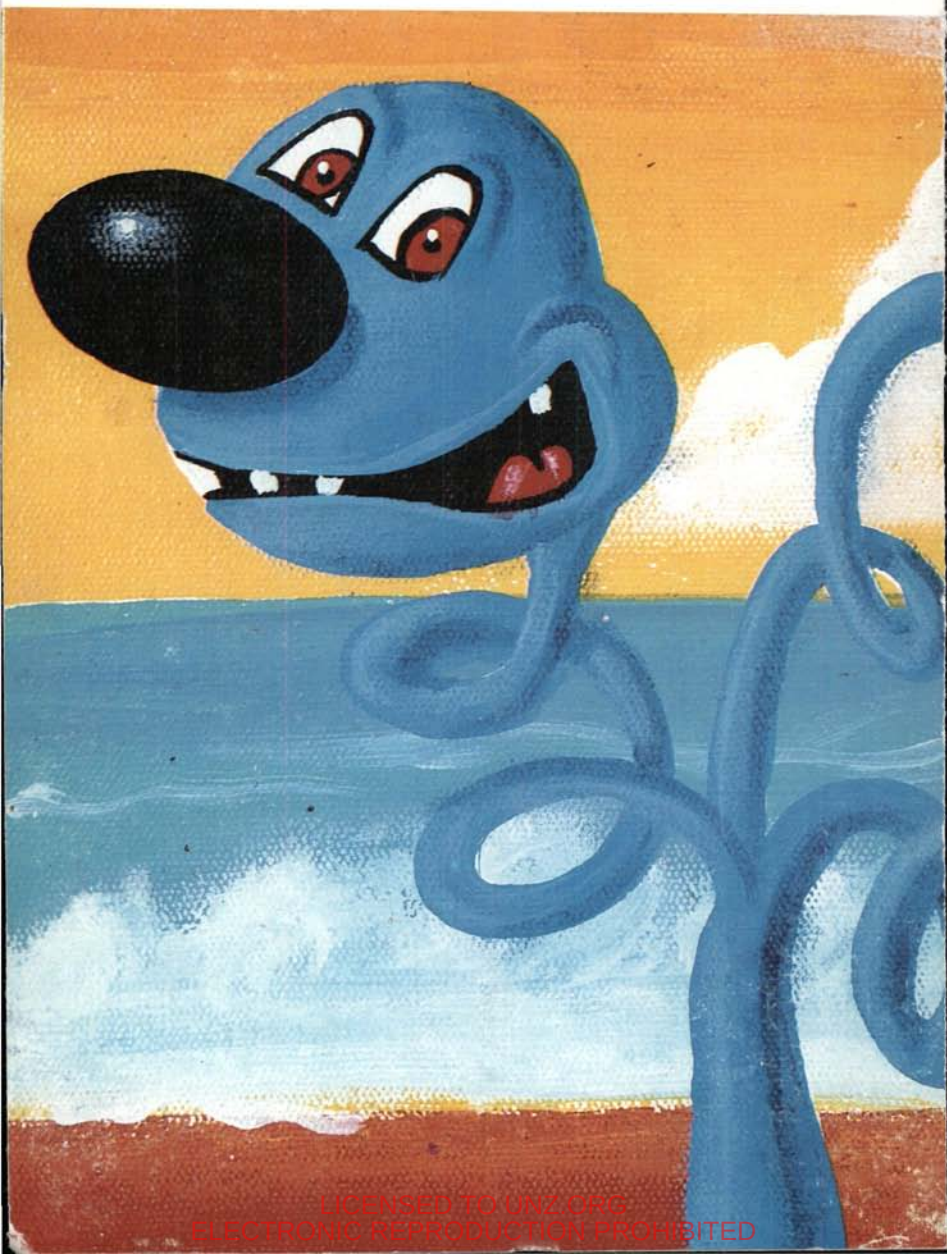

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